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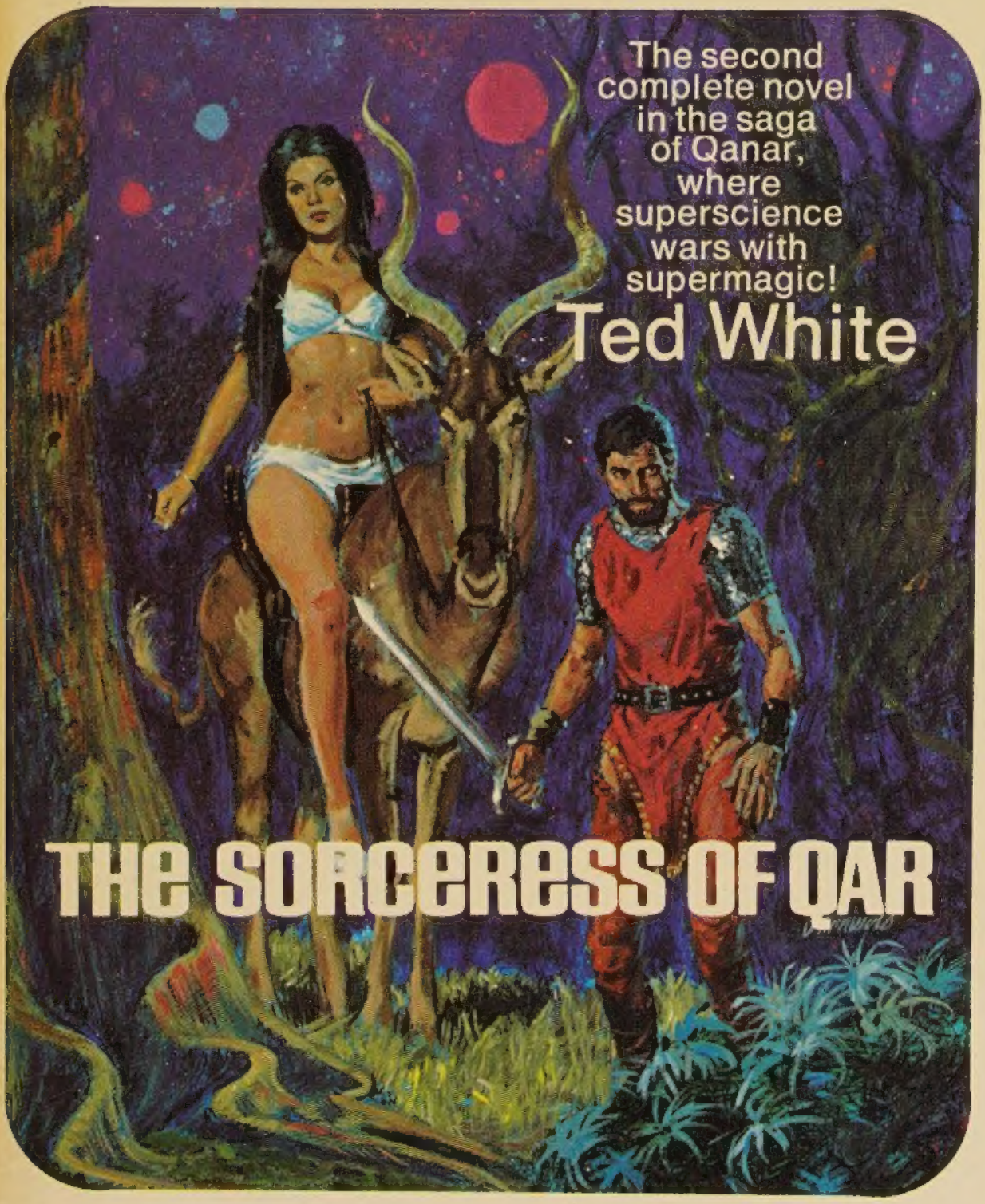

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They might have a chance . . .

The amplifier had lain unused for three thousand years—since the last time the Sorceress Shannara had used it. It seemed to be in working condition, but . . .

And the amplifier was the key. . . . With it—and **only** with it—Elron and Shannara might have a chance to defeat the evil warlocks who threatened their planet.

They had traveled many hundreds of miles, over desert sands and jungle terrors and freezing mountains and other, less pleasant obstacles, to reach this key, this amplifier.

If the amplifier functioned, it would strengthen Shannara's gifts as a "Sorceress" and allow her to use these gifts to overcome the warlocks.

If it functioned. . . .

dedication:

TO LARRY SHAW,
WHO BELIEVES IN QANAR
AS I DO

AUTHOR'S NOTE—

I AM INDEBTED TO DAVE VAN ARNAM, A LONG-TIME FAN AND DEVELOPING AUTHOR OF SWORD & SORCERY STORIES, FOR THE OPENING LINE OF THIS BOOK.

TED WHITE

THE SORCERESS OF QAR

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THE SORCERESS OF QAR

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PROLOGUE

HUMANITY AS WE KNOW IT is not the end product of evolution, but only a way station. Maximillion Quest woke up one day to find himself an evolved superman—his Gift had come to him with physical adulthood—and found awaiting him the Others, whose own Gifts had enabled them to divide and rule the world among them, unbeknown to humanity at large.

Max Quest represented a threat to the Others' status quo, and the story of his battle with them has been told in *Phoenix Prime*. In the course of this epic battle, Max was thrown into an alternate world of reality—into the world of Qanar.

Qanar is an ancient, never entirely conquered world, in which humanity once struggled to a civilization of sorts—a sparsely spread global empire that spoke a single language, established a scientific technology that was prodigious in some respects, and then was all but wiped out by a cataclysm the nature of which has been forgotten in the ensuing two thousand–some years.

Now humanity remains scattered in pockets over the face of this vast wild world, the inbred descendants of the few survivors of that long-ago catastrophe. Only the island continent of Zanor has been spared, and here too the population has declined and grown genteelly degenerate; and in common with those in other parts of the world, the people here have begun to confuse science and technology with magic. The greater arts are forgotten; only the lesser arts remain.

Max Quest made daring use of the once-vast network

of matter transmitters—now too unreliable for anyone to chance their use—and visited the City Zominor on Zanor, where he met the Sorceress, a woman born three thousand years earlier, trained as a scientist and technician, and thrown into this dying world by a malfunctioning matter transmitter.

He also traveled to the dead City Tanakor, now only a few subterranean ruins overgrown by a vast forest, and west to the new and robust City Qar, one of the few rallying points of humanity. And on his way he met and saved the life of a minor noble named Elron.

Thus the stage is set for our present story—for this is to be the story of Elron and the Sorceress, and what happened on the world of Qanar after Max Quest had completed his quest and left once more for Earth, and his final confrontation with the Others. . . .

Chapter One

"As ALL good stories must," said Elron, "this one begins with a fight."

"Ummm," said Tagar, waiting patiently for the rest.

"It was on that meadow, on the Western Road, that the outlaws struck us—it was an ambush, and a well-laid one, too. They badly outnumbered us, and they had the advantage of surprise. It would've been a total defeat, but for the warlock. . . ."

And that had been the beginning of the story. Its ending had brought him here, tonight, tired and somehow bitter, despite all he had accomplished.

The outlaws had preyed upon the Western Road, along its forested length, for many years. It had been bad for trade, and it was inevitable that the Duke of Qar would send his men out against them sooner or later. The outlaws had speeded up the process, however. They had attacked the Duke's own nobles. It had taken little prompting then for the Duke to order Elron to the final task—the outlaw band must be wiped out.

It had been done, and Elron was pleased that it had been done. Taking his cue from the strange warlock who had passed among them, he had made it a trial by fire. He had led his army of men across the River Qar, into the deep forest, and by a circuitous route to the outlaws' tree-top holdings. And there he had burned them out.

But completion of the deed had not carried with it the elation it should have given him. He had memories of faces—the faces of men, their bodies twisted by the hard fall from the high branches, their hair gone, and their

clothes charred or still burning. It was well enough to say to oneself that these men were plunderers, murderers, rapists. But the memory of their faces, caught frozen for death's eternity in grimaces of pain and terror, had stayed with him, through two solitary steins of eale. . . .

"Ah, Elron!" A hearty hand had clapped him across his back, startling him from his thoughts. "More eale?" It had been Tagar, his lieutenant, shouting to be heard over the din of the ealehouse. He'd dropped to a seat on the broad wooden bench. "You are looking distant," he observed, his voice less loud.

Elron looked up. The ealehouse was filled with boistering men, most of them of his command. It was a good ealehouse, as such places went, for the City Qar, and it was one often chosen by the Duke's men in their off hours. He raised his hand and signaled. A girl—she had a beautifully turned backside; it was a shame her face was so homely—moved lithely through the crowd, past two wrestling drunks who became distracted by her passage and attempted to wrestle her, the tray balanced on her hand never faltering.

"Another eale," Elron said. "He'll buy it." He jerked his thumb at Tagar. "And bring me a roast ham. The juices must still be running."

She nodded. "And will you be buying the gentleman nothing in return?"

Tagar laughed. "He'll buy me an eale and share his ham with me, if you make it a large one."

She gave another nod and then turned into the crowd, their empty eale steins now added to her tray.

"Do not be deceived by her face," Tagar said, gazing after her. "The rest of her body does not lie."

"Ah," Elron grunted.

"Now what can that mean? Don't tell me you find the subject boring? Hey, Elron! You are being too quiet."

He shook himself. "Perhaps so. I am tired. It was a long ride. I find I no longer have the simple zests I once did, Tagar."

"It was that warlock. He placed a spell of gloom upon you."

"In a way . . . in a way."

Tagar leaned forward, his elbows bracing him on the heavy planked table. "Seriously now, what is it? I haven't seen you in good spirits since the day you brought that man across the river."

"Thoughts, Tagar—just thoughts."

"Tell me."

He told him. He told of the battle on the meadow, of how all but him had died, of how the warlock had mysteriously appeared, to rout the outlaws and use magic balms upon his wounds.

"He saved my life; I told you that. I don't know where he came from. At first, in my delirium, I thought he was materialized from the great green forest herself. He was a man the like of which I have never seen before. A power radiated from him. Confidence—he was so completely confident. He sought a woman; the outlaws had taken her. We followed a trail I could never have read, and he led me directly to their holdings.

"I have never told you this; I have told no one, not even the Duke himself. But the warlock—Max Quest, he called himself, although I think he must have taken the second name upon himself as a title—the warlock used his magic and raised us both into the tree limbs. I felt a great hollowness in my stomach, as though I was falling. I was certain I was falling! But instead we *rose*, into the air, into the tree.

"He led me down a broad limb, to the chieftain's hut. His woman was there—captive. He took my sword and in one blow killed the man. Then, to frighten back the others, he turned himself into a great flaming torch, a blazing pyre. Where his feet stood, the wood caught fire. Those he touched screamed with pain. Most of them leapt to their deaths rather than face him. It was a terrible sight, and one I shall never forget."

"So that was why you had us bring the oil and pitch?"

"Yes—it was the best way. Perhaps they thought him

returned. It would have frightened them all the more. In any case, ringing their holding with burning trees, we gave them no aerial escape, and we ourselves held the ground. But that was not all I meant to say about Max Quest."

"Ahh." It was an affirmative.

"Afterwards we three—he, his woman, and I—rode out to the Western Road, and after some hard riding made camp. Naturally, I chose to bed a little way from them, because I knew they desired to be alone. And, also naturally, I was still not far enough yet from them. I overheard their murmurs as they lay together, and I heard their sounds as they made love together. It was not something I was a willing party to, Tagar. I would have left the camp altogether except that they supposed me already asleep. In truth, I slept little that night.

"The next day—now, hear me out; no interruptions! I have a point to make. The next day we rode until we came to a place along the road that each of them recognized. It was a place of ruins, but hardly visible as such. The forest had so totally overgrown them that all I saw were hillocks until they led me into them. The two of them, Max Quest and his woman, went into a hole. They gave me the reins of their beast and bade me goodbye.

"I wanted to go with them. I knew it was another world they were going to, a world quiet alien, but I wanted to stay with them. Can you understand that? And instead I took the reins of their beast, and I stood there, and I let them go. Afterwards I went in a little way. There were a few rooms there, but they were empty.

"I returned to Qar; that you knew. I reported to the Duke, who was not happy that I had left without his orders, and I formed the company, and we smashed the outlaws. Thus; and so—here we are. And you tell me I am too quiet. I am. Shall I tell you why, Tagar?"

"Have you not already?"

"Yes, and also no.

"I am no longer a young man, my friend. I am past thirty. Yet, although I am a noble, I have not married. I have no family.

"When the warlock saved my life, it set me to wondering—wondering what there was in my life that had made it worth the saving. If I had been saved, what might be the purpose? And I thought on all I had been and had done, and . . ." His voice dropped so that Tagar had to lean forward to hear him. "It added up to very little."

"Nonsense! You're in a black mood—everything looks that way to you now. With a little more eale, some good roast meat . . . Ah, here comes the wench now!" He poked Elron boisterously in the ribs with his elbow. "Something for the inner man now, and then later . . . an appetizing dessert, perhaps?" His nod was to the serving wench now approaching their table.

The light, furnished only by the thin yellow flames of the oil lamps on the walls, was too dim for him to be certain, but Elron thought he noticed a change in the wench's bearing and expression. She no longer wove her way through the other men in a sort of dancelike pattern, but strode stiffly, her tray several times in mortal danger.

But he said nothing as the woman lowered the tray to the table. The juices of the heavy ham kindled a fierce hunger in him as their thick aroma filled the air, and he waited impatiently for the slow-fingered wench to lift the ham's thick wooden platter from the tray and position it on the table before them. Then she placed fresh eale steins at their elbows and turned her back. She had said not a word.

"Ah, Elron," Tagar said. "You've spread your black mood on that sweet girl, and now there'll be no dessert!"

Elron had pulled his short knife from his belt and was carving thick chunks of the steaming meat onto the platter. "I've been telling you, Tagar; you're slow tonight. I am in no mood for wenching with empty-headed serving girls. I'm sick of this rowdy life." He bit off a chunk of the meat and allowed himself a smile. "I will say that the hams are good here, though."

Tagar took a stiff draught of his eale before replying. "You're wanting a wife and a family and all similar such burdens? You're thinking foolish, Elronsh—I, er, Elron." He lifted his hand clumsily and brushed at his face. "Thassh

funny," he mumbled. Then his eyes cleared for a moment, and he gave Elron a piercing glare.

"Eale tasted-funny," he said, struggling to get the words out. Then he fell face forward, into the carved ham.

Elron was suddenly aware that the room had quieted. A hush had fallen, broken only by a few sodden mumblings and an occasional crash as a bench overturned. He started to his feet, his knife in his hand—then paused, half-standing.

"What madness is this?" he muttered under his breath. "They are all in drunken stupors!"

Volstad, a great man-mountain who was one of Elron's sergeants, pushed his head up from a nearby table, stared at Elron without recognition, then fell over backward from his bench. The crash shook the room, fluttering the lights. Then there was silence.

"The eale—drugged!" Elron moved catlike down the aisle between the long tables, stepping lightfootedly over the bodies tumbled in his way.

The kitchen was simply an area arched off from the common room, but in its center sat a great four-sided fireplace, where the cooking was done, an effective barrier that created privacy for the part of the kitchen that lay on its other side. He slipped quickly around the fireplace but found no one. The whole kitchen was deserted. This was yet another riddle!

Beyond was a doorway leading to a stairway, which led to the floor above. He met the wooden-faced serving wench at the bottom of the stairs.

"You!" he said, grabbing her wrists, his voice low but intense. "What have you done to my men?"

She tensed for a moment, then slumped. "You are in great danger," she whispered. Her features showed no expression. "Come with me, quickly!"

"Hold on!"

"There is no time! They expect you to be—ah, like the others." She gave a nod toward the common room. "If they find you here, like this, they kill you," she hissed. "Upstairs, quickly!"

Against his will, Elron let the woman lead him up the

rough-hewn stairs and into a small room. It was apparently her own, for a bed occupied perhaps a quarter of the room, and a woman's clothes hung from the hooks on the walls.

Once inside, she closed the door, dropping a bar across it. Then, her fingers stumbling, she began to remove her clothes.

Elron sat on the edge of the bed and watched. His mind seemed stalled by the turn of events, and now he could only look on, incapable of astonishment, waiting to see what improbable thing might happen next.

The girl wore little more than her outer clothes, a fact he had already guessed. And it did not seem unlikely that she had performed this task before, with others. He found himself admiring her body, in a distant sort of way, and agreeing with Tagar that indeed it told a different story than her horsey face. But although her breasts were full and large-nippled, and her pelvic girdle indicated both strength and agility in her hips, it was also too evident that her charms appealed largely to the unfastidious. A simple glance, let alone a breath drawn in this closed room, told him she had not bathed beyond the elbows in many months.

"You have not undressed," she said. "Quickly, you must take off your clothes!"

"I'm afraid I'm not interested just now," Elron said dryly.

"But you must! They have a peephole. They will leave us be, if it appears . . ." she gestured at the bed.

Elron shook his head and gave a short laugh.

"This farce has gone far enough. Who are these people who will do these things, wench? And why have they had my men drugged?"

With apparent desperation, the girl threw herself upon him, knocking him flat under her well-structured body. She planted her lips against his and snaked her arms around his neck. His head was lying on a pillow, and he could not tell which made him want to gag more—the stench of the pillow or that of her breath.

He swept his arms up, inside and under hers, and swung

them out, knocking her arms loose from their grip on him. He had guessed its presence, but only then did he glimpse the knife she now held in her right hand. It had come from under the pillow.

Her jaws were clenched, and her face was screwed into a mask of hate. She was hissing like a maddened cat. But before she could bring the knife about, he brought his knees up under her stomach and kicked.

She flew backward off the bed, her back slamming into the wall. The knife flew from her hand. Then she fell forward, to her knees.

He was at her in a bound. With his left hand he grabbed her hair, pulling her head up and back. With his right hand, he slapped her, back and forth, both cheeks.

"Now, vixen, speak to me," he grunted.

She stared at him with eyes gone mad, whites showing all around the irises. Her breath hissed and bubbled through her teeth.

"Speak!" He open-palmed her face, the impact snapping her head to one side.

She said nothing. Suddenly her body went rigid; then, with a shriek, she threw herself upon him, her hands drawn into claws, tendons standing out on her at every joint, her attack a great spasm that ripped and tore at him.

The surprise of it caught him off balance. He fell backward, one leg catching on the bed, pitching him to the floor.

Instantly she was on him, her long nails clawing strips from his exposed skin, her teeth snapping at his throat.

There was nothing else to do but kill her. Her strength was too great for him to hold her back any longer. He got his right hand into her hair and held her head back, away from his neck. She clawed at his hand and his arm, but with his left hand he freed his knife from his belt and plunged it into her gut.

As he stabbed, he rolled against her, driving the blade in deeper and throwing her off his body.

She shrieked again, and blood bubbled in her mouth. Then suddenly her body was limp.

He pulled the knife free and climbed to one knee, staring down at her.

Her eyes opened, and for a moment there was sanity in them.

"The Duke," she whispered. "You must save the Duke."

A last spasm rolled over her, as her muscles were loosed by death. A foul smell filled the room. Elron regained his feet shakily and unbarred the door.

The men were all dead.

He stood and stared at their unmoving bodies. A fast-acting poison. She had waited until all were at least a little in their cups and would not notice the poison's taste—if it even had that much taste.

And now his men were all dead. He nudged the mountainous Volstad with his toe. It had felled them all, even this great, boastful ox.

He moved to his own table. Tagar lay as he'd left him, his face in the congealing juices of the now-cold ham, the back of his neck purple.

Quite dead.

He went to the door and peered out into the gloom of the night.

The twisting street was curiously empty. No cars bumped over its rough stone pavements; no happy drunks staggered down its length, singing ribald songs at the tops of their lungs. Shop doors were closed, and upper-floor windows were shuttered. Only stray beams of light carved out the silent darkness, and these covertly.

What was going on here?

He tried to think back on their arrival. Had anything been amiss then?

No, there had been nothing he could put his finger on. He had been lost deep within himself soon after he had followed his men into The Wildebeest, the ealehouse most frequented by the Duke's men, but not so abstracted that he would not have sensed something off-key.

There had been nothing off-key or at all out of the usual until the serving wench had come with their food

and eale. Yes, that made sense. Here was the beginning of it, then. The woman was not as she had been before. And the change must have occurred after she took their order but before she served the ham.

The change—what could it be? He thought on the initial awkwardness of her movements and on the strangely abrupt way she had behaved with him at the bottom of the stair, and then on her incredible seizure, her fit of madness there at the end, followed by that brief moment of sanity.

Could it be? Could she had been possessed by a demon?

Unhooking his sword belt from the pegs by the doorway, he strapped it on and drew the sword. He tested its edge with his fingertips. Blunted. It would be needing honing, but he had no time for it now. He moved quickly from the doorway into the night.

City Qar is a new city, one of the few built by men since the long-forgotten Disaster. It began as a trading-place where the River Qar and its eastern tributary forked. As man once again began multiplying in this part of the world, trade grew. The small village was a natural focal point for the traders from the east, north, and west, and the delta land beyond was fertile for tilled crops and grazing animals.

The first Duke of Qar was no more than a shrewd trader who had seen what opportunities lay waiting in this growing village. It was he who had sold out his trade goods in exchange for land, then had built walls around the newly dubbed City Qar—walls that gathered within them an area five times greater than the city had ever enjoyed—and had organized a gang of mercenaries into fit soldiers, the City Guard.

The second Duke, his son, had built a great mansion, a building four stories tall, and of stone quarried many miles upriver; but he had done little else. However, people had come to live in the security of the city, and he had sold land to them at a handsome profit.

The fourth Duke was Elron's present master, and under

his rule the Dukedom had grown enormously. He was a benevolent man who conquered by trade rather than the sword and had made his city prosperous in the process. But he maintained the City Guard as a firmly disciplined troup that brooked no disorder within the city walls and kept a safe patrol of the surrounding countryside, as well. Many people in nearby lands had heard of the City Qar, come to gawk at it, and settled down to stay.

Barely four generations old, City Qar was a young and robust city, a place of brawling and merrymaking, the home of a lusty people. But a traveler through its streets this night would not have suspected this. It was as though a massive curfew had fallen and no one dared venture without his door. Elron found the very weight of it pressing down on him with a foreboding chill.

There was no moon, and the streets had no lights. Fog had risen from the river, and it crept about his ankles. It was a thoroughly unpleasant night.

When he came to the massive stone walls of the Duke's mansion, his step quickened without his awareness. The gateway at its entrance stood open and unguarded, surely a bad omen.

He had barely stepped into the antechamber beyond, when the iron gate swung clankingly shut behind him. He whirled at the sound.

There was no one there. The way was empty. Beyond the iron grill, he saw only the darkness of night.

He feared now that he was too late. But he pressed forward, walking boldly down the carpeted center of the corridor. His presence was known—that was obvious.

The door to the Duke's great hall, hardwood bound in iron straps, swung open at his approach. He stepped through and did not turn this time when it closed behind him.

The room was dimly lit, for few of the lamps were burning. It was a large room, baronial in size: two stories tall, a balcony at one end and, beneath the balcony, a fireplace tall enough to stand in. The walls were covered with tapestries and hangings, and the floor was flag-

stone. It was a cold and clammy place, even in summer. His steps rang too loudly in his own ears as he crossed the floor toward the fireplace.

A good fire was burning in the fireplace, and two men stood before it, silhouetted. One was short, tubby, seemingly soft and inoffensive. The other was a giant, tall and heavily bulked. They held their positions without speaking and waited for him to approach them. He had never seen them before.

Chapter Two

He had never seen them before, but the smaller one nodded to him, and smiled.

"Ah, Mr. Elron. So good to see you, sir."

Elron halted before them. "*Mr.* is not a part of my name; I know it not. And while I am noble-born, I am not yet a Sir."

The man smiled again. "He quibbles with us, Archer. Can you imagine that? The man has twice skirted death narrowly, and yet he quibbles with us." He addressed Elron directly again. "You stand before the new Dukes of Qar, and let us not voice any arguments to that." His voice had grown steely. "I am Edwards; this is Archer. Archer does not speak. He has not spoken for many of your lifetimes. You may address yourself to either of us; I will answer."

Elron felt his mind racing. "Why . . . what . . . ?"

"Why are we here? What are we? Hah! I see by your thoughts that you have already met one of our kind, the warlock Quest."

"I cannot believe he was of your kind," Elron replied,

fighting to hold his voice steady. "I sense nothing about you of the strength of that man."

Edwards's face twisted. "Do not speak to me of him!" he hissed—and in his tone Elron caught the faint reflection of the serving wench's toneless voice.

"He was your enemy, then."

Edwards's face purpled, and then it was as though a great fist had smitten Elron's brain. He felt an enormous explosion of pain within his skull. He fell to the floor, clapping his hands to his head. He did not hear his own scream; the pain in his head was too loud.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the torturing pressure was gone. He looked up, dazed, incurious, his emotions all but wiped out by the shock.

Edwards was sitting in a chair, where before he had been standing. Archer seemed not to have moved. In a thin monotone, Edwards said, *"I told you not to speak to me of him."*

There was a long pause, during which Elron said nothing. Then, "The Duke?" Elron asked dully.

"The previous Duke is no longer with us," Edwards said, his voice returning to its more normal oily wheeze. "We are the new Dukes. We are your rulers, your absolute masters. Do you understand?"

"You tried to kill me."

"It was to our advantage to remove as many potential troublemakers as possible. You are to be congratulated on your resourcefulness. But I trust you will be no troublemaker. Eh?" And, as though with his thumb and forefinger, he tweaked at Elron's brain, sending an electric twinge through his skull in reminder.

"No."

"No, what?"

"Ah—no, sir."

"Very good, Elron."

There was no signal, but suddenly two men were at his side. Each took an arm, and they led him away, through a side passage, to a stairway that led below.

He had heard that vaults existed under the Ducal Manse, but he had never seen them. The fourth Duke

had used them largely as a place to keep his perishables, Elron knew, because they stayed quite cool, even in summer.

The two men led him unprotesting, his mind still numbed, down dark stairs. Flickering torches cast widely spaced islands of light into the Stygian darkness. It was damper down here than even in the foggy streets. From somewhere distant, the dripping of water echoed.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, speaking to the men for the first time. "Why are you bringing me down here?"

"You must be purified," said the man on his right. His tone was lifeless. A cold chill passed down Elron's spine, and with it, clearer thought.

"Purified?"

"Your mind must be cleansed of rebellious thoughts."

"I see. Have you been purified?"

"I have."

"And how do you find it?"

The man did not answer.

"I asked you—what is it like?"

They were passing under the light of a sputtering torch. The man's eyes seemed pools of blackness. His expression seemed empty. Then his eyes grew haunted.

"I—I have lost my—my soul!" His cry stabbed out through the stone corridors like a shriek of pain. Then his body went rigid.

Elron had seen this before. Great cords stood out on the man's neck as every muscle in his body seemed to knot against another. The seizure had locked him momentarily rigid.

The other, still gripping Elron's left arm, tugged him on, as though unaware of what was happening. Elron whirled and jumped back, swinging the man about and slamming him face first into the stone wall.

But he did not let go. As his face moved into the light again, Elron was horrified to see the greenish moss of the wet stone blocks now smeared across the man's immobile face, his nose smashed flat, blood staining downward.

He would not let go. Elron struggled against him, but the man's grip was like a vise, locked upon his left arm. He swung him back and forth, smashing him from one wall of the narrow passage to the other, all to no effect. And now the first man seemed to be recovering from his fit.

He knew this: he would never allow them to turn him into a soulless husk of himself such as these two had become. He had been stunned by Edwards's mind-blast—by the warlock's spell, as he thought of it—but now his spirit was returning. He must escape! He must get free!

They had not taken his sword. He had no wish to do this to a man whose only crime was his enchantment, but there was nothing else. He drew the sword and held it with the point toward his captor.

"Loose me, fellow," he grated. "Do it now!"

The man stared back at him from eyes dunk deep within the ravaged ruins of his face. Blood still flowed from his nose; his tunic front was dark with blood. But he might as well have been deaf and blind. He made no sign and did not relax his grip.

Elron raised his sword and brought it down with all his strength upon the man's arms.

The jarring blow severed the man's left arm, just below his elbow, but only sliced his right bicep to the bone.

His mouth opened wide, and his face twisted in soundless agony. He did not scream.

And his right hand did not relax its grip.

Elron was panicking now, fear sending adrenalin coursing through his veins. The man was truly demon-possessed! He kicked at him, furiously.

The man's severed arm pumped blood in heavy spurts across the stones of the walls and floor, and his face was white, but his grip was still of iron.

Elron swung his sword again and cut himself loose.

The armless man fell backward, tripping over his rising companion, knocking him flat and pinning his body. Blood covered them both.

Elron limped quickly back down the passage. He had barely reached the foot of the stairs before he was quite thoroughly sick.

At the head of the stairs, Elron hesitated. If he turned left, he would follow the short passage that emerged in the great hall. There was every possibility that the two warlocks were still there. But the only other way was a corridor that led ahead—away from the entrance to the building, and toward he knew not what.

Rich, sombre-hued wall hangings interrupted by oil lamps pointed the way down the unfamiliar corridor. There was no choice, really. Sword still in hand, he moved quietly down this new way.

There was no sound but that of his own feet on the stone floor. The wall hangings gave off a musty odor that at another time he would have found almost pleasant.

The end of the passageway was barred by a thick drapery. Cautiously, he pulled back one side and slipped through . . .

. . . into a world of shimmering crystal. He was in a room that seemed immense, the walls too distant to be seen. But everywhere about him light glimmered in the air. And ahead . . . ahead, a great troup of men, swords drawn, each standing precisely behind the other, waited in ready challenge!

His breath rasped in his throat, and his pulse hammered in his ears, but Elron raised his sword, to return their challenge bravely.

Immediately, as one the men who faced him raised their swords, in a mockingly identical gesture.

He stepped back.

They stepped back.

What witchery was this? He whirled, to face to his right.

A column of men whirled to face him.

Back, to his left, to the opposite side.

Yet another column of men, each brandishing a ready sword.

He turned to the corridor from which he had emerged.

It was gone, and in its place, a line of men, the first of them so close that their two swords might touch.

Elron smiled. And then he laughed, as the men before him silently laughed back.

Images—reflections. He knew not how they had been created here, in a room, but he had stood before silent forest pools to stare down at his own reflection often enough to understand the principle.

The man who faced him, relaxed now, was darkly bearded, as Elron was, and wore the same clothes over his muscular frame—a shirt of light chain; a red leather tunic, belted at the waist and falling over his breechclout; and leather leggings. His eyes seemed to glower from under heavy black brows, and neither his face nor his tunic were freshly cleaned. Soot stained his temples, and more soot mingled with dried blood on his leathers.

"You make a pretty picture, Elron," said an oily, wheezing voice from behind him.

Elron swung to face the dumpy figure of Edwards, the warlock.

The man stood in shadows somewhere across the room. Elron blinked and rubbed one hand over his eyes. It was difficult to see the man.

"Admiring yourself, eh? Tch, tch . . . such vanity," Edwards chided.

"I was admiring your room of images, Warlock," Elron said.

"Ah! And well you might. I expect you will find it a room that takes some, hmm, getting used to," Edwards wheezed. "We shall try to be sure you have the opportunity." He turned his back and began walking away.

"Wait!" Elron said, hurrying after him. But suddenly his own image was rushing at him, and his outthrust sword clanged against a barrier.

Edwards paused and turned to look back. "It's not a large room," he called. "I expect you'll find it quite familiar soon!"

Elron looked over his shoulder back across the way. There, too, the figure of Edwards stared mockingly at him.

He ran back across the room—and slammed headlong into his own image again.

"It's really a very cozy little room," Edwards's distant voice remarked. Elron stood nose to nose with his image

in the crystal barrier and watched the warlock's figure disappear into the distance of the great room.

He paced off the confines of his cell. It was not more than twelve feet square. He looked at the high ceiling overhead. A cut-crystal chandelier hung in the center of the cubical. Its diffused light was echoed and mirrored in geometrical patterns throughout the whole vast illusory hall.

There was no break in the walls of the room; no sign of the doorway through which he'd come.

An enchantment—they'd wrought an enchantment upon this room and created for him a cell whose apparent dimensions extended to infinity and whose population mirrored him in every direction.

He was tired—bone-tired. It had been a long day, much of it spent mounted. He had looked forward to nothing more than a quiet couple of eales, a good dinner, and an early bed. Now, look at him! Twice he'd fought for his life and won it only narrowly, only to find himself brought up short in this windowed cage. What kind of reward was *that* for the loyal Elron, who'd led his men a day's march to defeat the outlaws?

Ah, but who was he to be thinking of this, when the Duke from whom he wished a better reward had himself found a bitter ending?

He sank to his haunches. Tomorrow would be another day. . . . A thought galvanized him—tomorrow they would "purify" him! Tomorrow—how much longer would this night last?—tomorrow he would become a soulless husk, like unto those two who had led him below. Which would be the worse, he wondered—to be still faintly aware of his loss or to miss it not at all?

Neither must happen! He must escape!

He leaped to his feet and swung his sword angrily at the image that faced him. The blade struck the barrier and glanced off, sounding a shrill screech that ran shivers up and down his backbone.

He reversed the blade, holding it in both hands, hilt outward, laid it back over his shoulder like an ax, and

swung—sending the heavy blunt hilt of the sword smashing squarely into the crystal barrier. Like an icy gong, the wall danced and rang.

A spiderweb of cracks laced suddenly outward in every direction as his sword hilt struck the wall. At the center of the impact, the crystal had turned white. And now, for the first time, he could actually see the reflective surface as a two-dimensional plane. The delicate tracery of cracks extended outward for a radius of several feet, marring and disfiguring the flawless surface. Now his image did not face him quite directly but seemed to be fragmented by a prism.

He grunted with satisfaction, raised his sword, and struck again.

For a moment the room was filled with the pure, high singing of the crystal—then it collapsed, the whole wall falling in shards about him. He leaped back, but not before one thin sliver had gashed his left forearm.

The barrier gone, he stared in anticipation into the room beyond—*only to see a room that exactly mirrored the one in which he stood.*

He stepped wonderingly into it. The shards of crystal had fallen equally into the two rooms. Looking back, he could tell no difference. He might as easily have broken through from this side.

He stopped and picked up a small fragment of crystal. It was thin—so thin that it almost cut his hand. Holding it facing him, he could look into its surface and see his own countenance. It seemed to shimmer as he held it, and he could not distinguish its actual surface. It was like a tiny, irregular-shaped window, through which he could look. He turned it over. Its reverse was identical.

He rose to his feet, strode to the center of the room, and dropped the shard. It smashed, tinkling, on the stone floor. He ground his leather heel into it, pulverizing it into white dust.

Then he looked back into the room from which he'd come.

In the center of its floor: a smear of white dust.

With an oath, he raised his sword and slammed the hilt into the nearest crystal wall, hammering at it without pause.

The blows set up keening vibrations, an eerie whining that climbed in pitch until again the wall shattered.

He plunged through to the opposite wall and struck again, smashing until the din of singing crystal was a constant shriek within his ears—smashing repeatedly at wall after wall, bringing each down, to find beyond it an identical cubicle, each a mirrored replica of the first.

What mad place was this? Could there be any escape, or would dawn find him still battering the endless walls of his cell?

He stared down at the floor by his feet. A smear of white dust marked the place where, in one of these myriad rooms, he had ground a shard of crystal underfoot. He sank down to the floor, exhausted, and stared unseeing at the powder.

A blackness seemed to descend over Elron then—a blackness born of weariness and despair. His eyes half-closed, and he sat immobile, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, hearing nothing, in the kind of trance that a man endures when he has been pushed too far and can be pushed no further.

He awoke with a jerk, his head snapping back from its nod, his arms flailing. For a moment he had felt he was falling; then he was again sitting on a solid stone floor, in a room that surrounded him with his own image.

How long had he slept? Was it yet dawn? He was furious at himself for having fallen asleep now, of all times. And yet he sensed himself to be more fit now, more able to think and reason clearly, more suited to the task that still awaited.

His limbs were numb, and thousands of tiny pins began jabbing him as he climbed clumsily to his feet and regained his circulation. He leaned over to pick up his sword and then halted, still bent, to stare into a shard of crystal.

The thin pane lay flat upon the stone floor. Looking directly down at it, Elron saw his own familiar features.

But when he glanced obliquely at it, he could see one wall of the room. *And set in the wood-paneled wall was a doorway.*

His head snapped up, and he stared in startled wonder at the wall he'd seen reflected.

His own wide-eyed face stared back at him from the mirrored surface.

He looked back at the crystal fragment on the floor. At first he saw only reduplicated images. Then, as he started to glance away, he caught again from the corner of his eye the view of the unmirrored wall.

He looked up again. The wall was the one that had been to his left as he'd battered his way through from the previous identical rooms. He tried to think—had he ever attempted to smash the walls on his left? Or had he gone straight to the facing walls or to those on his right?

Once more he climbed wearily to his feet and approached his own image.

He reached out with his hand and felt his fingers touch the familiar cold, hard surface. But he pushed harder, *and his hand penetrated the mirror.*

He stared, shocked, at the sight of his arm reaching into its own mirror image. Then he thrust his entire arm, his head, and his shoulder through.

He gasped as the surface momentarily surrounded and pressed against his face. It was like pushing one's head into a pool of water, only heavier, and more resilient. But then he was through, staring at the draped door through which he'd entered this mad room.

He turned and stared back into the room. It was as he'd first seen it. Quickly he pushed open the drape and hurried down the hall.

The fog-wrapped town still slept as Elron made his way quietly through its narrow cobbled streets. The fog had risen until now it blotted out the sky, as well, and there was no way to see the stars or to estimate the time. Neither moon was visible through the thick overcast.

He found his way to the stables near the Gate, and

there saddled his beast unhindered. The tawny animal raised its great horned head and nuzzled hopefully against him, but he had no sweets or tidbits for it this time. He secured the high-cantled saddle and checked its bags. He had not emptied them from his earlier trip, and they still contained fire-making flints and fleece, a packet of dried meat, and extra bolts for his spring-powered gun, which he took down from the stall's wall and inserted into its saddle holster. The beast had already been groomed by the stabler, and now all that was required was to mount and be off. Yet Elron hesitated, thinking over his scant plan.

It was plain that there would be no help to be found against the two evil warlocks here in City Qar. This was a place where magic was rarely seen and had never been practiced. Ordinary bravery counted for very little against these usurpers.

But Max Quest, the warlock who had befriended him, had told him of his travels to other parts of this great world. He had told him of the matter transmitter in the ruins of the buried City Tanakor and of how it might carry a man in the twinkling of an eye to a far-off part of the world, to the City Zominor, a city of magic, where a Sorceress ruled.

He had never entered the portals of a matter transmitter, and he dared not think on what a strange and wondrously different place this Zominor might be, nor whether he could successfully enlist the aid of the fabled Sorceress. Magic was needed to fight magic—this much he knew. It would serve him nothing to borrow worries over the ultimate success of his plan. For the time being he would do well to concentrate upon his immediate needs, to escape across the river and find again the hidden ruins of City Tanakor.

Still brooding, he urged the beast out of the stable and, clopping far too loudly, down the lonely street toward the Gate.

Chapter Three

At first he thought the Gate was unguarded; then the reassuring bulk of Hogun, the gatekeeper, stepped forth, a long spear in his hands.

"Halt, nightrider! Show your face!"

"Ho, Hogan," Elron replied quietly. "Let me pass; you know me well enough."

Hogun dropped the trailing end of his spear to the ground, setting it firmly, the long point directed squarely at Elron's beast. "Show your face, stranger," he said ominously.

Elron's temper was frayed. "Show it yourself, you old fool," he snapped. "Do you think I'm carrying a lantern on me?"

"No man calls Hogun an old fool!" The words rumbled out of the man's deep chest. "Climb down from your stead, nightrider! I place you under arrest!"

Too late, Elron realized that here was yet another under the warlocks' spell. Hogun had been almost an uncle to him when Elron had been but a lad and had shown him many of the fighting arts he'd later used so well in combat. Had he been in his own mind, Hogun would have known Elron's voice on first hearing. Yet, Elron knew, he could not stand against the older man.

"Hogun, old friend," he said, quietly again. "It's I, Elron. You know me."

The other tightened his grip on the long and firmly planted spear. "I know of no Elron, nightrider. Tempt me with no honeyed words of false friendship! Step down now, and quickly, before I raise the alarm!"

Elron's beast shied a little and stamped its slender hooves nervously.

Hogun must not sound the alarm! He could only guess at how many of the Guard might be under the warlocks'

sway. And his escape must be without the warlocks' knowledge.

The beast shifted again, blowing its breath in the clammy fog that rolled in visibly through the gate.

In one smooth motion, Elron drew his sword and kicked his beast. The animal skittered sidewise and leaped forward. Elron counted on the apparent fact that those under the warlocks' enchantment reacted slowly and without their normal skills. He would need that advantage now. As Hogun swerved with his spear, Elron leaned low in the saddle and swung his sword at the spear.

The blade connected, with a jar that ran all the way up Elron's arm. The staff of the spear must have been of ironwood! But the beast was running, now, and when Elron looked back, he saw that Hogun was lying stunned in the broad plaza, his hands still gripping the headless spear.

Then they were through the gate, and the riverbank was below them. Elron leaned forward and urged the beast into a leap that hurled them full into the waters of the river.

A sheet of water sprayed out, and immediately Elron was kept busy holding the struggling animal on a course toward the opposite bank.

Upstream, only a few yards distant, was the broad woven cable of the ferry he had always taken before. But this time the River Qar must needs be swum. Fortunately, the current was not strong, for this was a broad, deep river.

They were in the middle of the stream, when the fog began thinning, and far to the west, close to the horizon, he glimpsed the Morning Moon, the tiny satellite that rose late at night and sped quickly across the heavens, to disappear below the horizon just as the sun rose behind it.

Could it be so late? The sky was purpling overhead, and stars were still visible only in the west. Indeed, it was the dawning of a new day.

Fear lent desperate determination to his flight, for he could not know how far the warlocks' dominion extended,

and he was certain that he had got this far only because his escape had been undetected, the warlocks undoubtedly being asleep.

But a new day was dawning—the day that was to have marked his "purification." And soon Hogun would be sounding the alarm, and they might well be organizing a pursuit.

He hoped he had not hurt Hogun; he hadn't wished to harm the older man, even though his feelings were obviously no longer reciprocated. If the warlocks could be defeated and their enchantments dispelled . . .

The beast climbed, dripping, up the riverbank, and Elron got down to take a spare blanket and wipe its flanks dry. As he worked open the saddlebag, he looked back, over the beast, across the river.

The sky to the east had lightened, the purples streaked with pinks and greens. But across the river, there was no sign of the City Qar. Low banks of fog hung closely over the water on the far side, obscuring all sign of human habitation. Only the ferry cable, disappearing into the billowing fog, gave lie to the apparent lifelessness of the scene. He stared for a long moment at the fog. It was not a natural thing. He shivered.

He made good time along the Western Road. The road was said to parallel one of the ancient roads, but he had never seen any signs of a former road except for the remarkably easy gap in the western mountains, beyond which lay the ancient City Ulloro, now more than half underwater. For most of its distance between City Qar and the mountains, the Western Road led through a thick and verdant forest. Elron had seen the ruins of two ancient cities; he was ready and willing to believe that, once, man had known a great civilization upon Qanar. But he could not believe that this forest was less than primeval. The woodsman in him cried out that this was an *old* forest—and yet it had encompassed and overgrown the very ruins of City Tanakor, his present destination. The ancient cities must indeed have been *very* ancient, for a forest such as this to grow up after their

passing. He did not concern himself with the cause of the decline of civilization on Qanar; he was by no means certain that civilization—whatever that might mean—had ever surpassed that which he now knew.

The road was deserted this day; he met no travelers. But the sun shone brightly, dappling the road with leaf patterns and, during the noon hours, driving him into the deeper shade beside the road for a brief meal and a nap.

He slept longer than he had planned, waking to find the shadows already long and the road cool beneath its green arbor. Birds sang their evening songs, and insects chirped mating calls. But he was much refreshed, and grateful for the sleep. He fixed himself another brief meal and then remounted to ride westward, toward the reddening rays of the low-hanging sun.

He rode on well into the evening, until the Red Moon was high overhead, its large disk reflecting down a muted sunshine that turned the nights into pinks and purples. Then he again made camp, well off the road this time, and lay in his blankets listening to the forest until he slept.

He was up with dawn and had unlimbered his spring gun before the first yellow rays of sunshine touched his forest glade. He'd cocked and loaded the gun, and now he lay in wait, prone against a gnarled treeroot.

Minutes passed, but he made no sound. A gentle breeze blew against his face, stirring the leaves high above into a soft cadence. The air smelled good—none of the smells of the open sewage of the streets here!—and for a time he toyed with the notion of remaining here in these vast woods, to live a life of freedom, apart from the City Qar, civilization, and all responsibilities. Yet he knew he could not. When he was younger it might have been possible, perhaps, but no longer. He could not escape his responsibilities; indeed, he sometimes hungered after those which he did not yet possess. That was what he had been trying to tell Tagar on that ill-fated night. He craved the responsibilities of a wife, children, a home, respectability. He wanted to perpetuate himself, to sow his seed and watch it bring forth new life. He was too old to play at being a man any longer; he must needs *be* a man.

A muney poked its nose out from behind a bush, across the glade. He waited until it had moved in its characteristic quick little hops to the center of the glade, still keeping it within his sights. It was upwind of him; it sensed nothing. The gun's movement was too slight for the muney to see.

He squeezed the trigger.

The coiled spring drove the thin, arrowlike bolt from the gun, and the muney was impaled. Elron leaped to his feet and ran for the small creature. It was struggling, but it made no noises; muneys were dumb.

The bolt had caught in its chest. He killed it with a blow to its head, then removed the bolt. He made a fire, skinned and dressed the muney, and salted and roasted it. It made an excellent breakfast.

Around midday, he slowed his beast to a canter and began peering anxiously through the dense forest foliage to his left. He was looking for sign of Tanakor—for the hummocks and hillocks that marked its overgrown ruins.

After he had fruitlessly searched the side of the path for more than two hours, he began to worry. Had he passed it by? Or, indeed, was this the proper stretch? He could not be certain; he had been in these ruins only once before. He had never even noticed them in his previous travels on this road.

Then, as the sun hung low in the west again, he came upon a familiar sight—a lightning-blasted tree. He was in the right area now. He watched more closely. And then, there . . .

He led his skittish beast in through the dense undergrowth that lined this side of the path, in among oddly shaped hillocks. There was nothing there to suggest more than a peculiar earth formation. Trees grew out of these hillocks and hummocks as they did elsewhere. Vines, bushes, and a thick carpet of dead leaves covered the ground.

But finally he stooped before a hole in the ground. It was the size of a doorway, and vines and roots rimmed its portal. Inside, the waning sunlight showed an even

floor, littered with dead leaves and twigs, several feet below ground level. The opening looked larger than it had before, as though the screen of masking foliage had been torn aside in several places, but he could not be sure. He might merely be remembering it differently.

He stripped the saddle, bridle, and reins from the beast, and then, after scratching it about the horns affectionately, he slapped its flank and bade it go. It might wander back to the city, and it might not. It had wild cousins here in the forest; it would make out easily. Forage was plentiful. He wished it luck, and then, carrying the gear, he jumped down into the tunnel.

The tunnel was a long, bare hallway that stretched ahead into darkness and he knew not where, but to his right was a room. Its high windows were not yet entirely choked by weeds and vegetation, and a kind of half-light filtered into the room, illuminating a floor half-strewn with an improbable sort of clutter. He stowed his gear in a near corner and then turned his attention to the shadowed side of the room opposite.

He had stood here before and wondered at the litter of broken glass (although he was not familiar with glass as such), tarnished bits of metal, well-decomposed remains of half-eaten meals, and other happily less-identifiable objects. They seemed to fan outward from a curious metal door that stood, supported by its own framework, separate from the wall behind it. Its metal must have been the product of magic, Elron thought, for although he had been told it was as old as the ruins, it showed no rust, no tarnish.

As he gripped the handle of the door, he felt his skin tingle where it touched the bare metal. Then, decisively, he pulled the door open, and walked through . . .

. . . into a room that seemed at first no more than another in the same ruins of Tanakor. It was a low-ceilinged room of hewn stone arches, and for no reason that he could explain, Elron felt himself to be deep underground.

He knew he could not still be in Tanakor, however. For this room smelled and looked used. Indeed, it was

filled with exactly the same litter that had strewn the floor of that other room, only—Elron felt he must be fair in his observation—somewhat more neatly arranged here and lacking the organic effluvia.

He stood stock still at first, taking in all that his senses could bring him, wondering if indeed this was the place of magic, the City Zominor of Zanor.

Then he heard footsteps scuffling upon a stair, and an old man, wheezing and shuffling, appeared at the far end of the room.

Elron remained silent, and the old man, a strange figure in heavy robes that reminded Elron of the clothes Max Quest had worn, advanced toward him without appearing to see him. The man wheezed and muttered as he approached a workbench piled high with clutter.

"Eh!" the man mumbled, and began pushing and shoving at the papers and apparatus that covered his bench, clearing a small space. Elron waited, and the inevitable occurred—a glass goblet fell to the floor and smashed.

The old man uttered a scorching oath and, wheezing dramatically, bent to pick up the larger pieces of the goblet. Then he turned, as if to throw them at Elron, and saw the tall man for the first time.

Immediately he let out a piercing shriek and dropped the broken pieces to the floor once more. "Eh, what's this? What's this? Who is this ugly creature who comes to my private rooms? Eh? Who?"

Elron took a step forward, and immediately the man broke off, retreating backward, his feet crunching over the pieces of the broken goblet.

"No, no! Leave me be! Begone, begone!" he cried, and began waving his hands frantically through the air as though signaling someone behind Elron.

"Hold on there, Old One," Elron said. "I've not come to cause you harm. Be still a moment, dammit! Be still!"

"Eh? What's that you say? No harm, eh? We'll see who harms whom, you! We'll see what the Rassanala has to say, eh?" The man was still backing covertly toward the stairs.

Elron was growing impatient with this gibbering old

fool. "You! What's your name?" he asked sternly, hoping to cut through the babble of meaningless threats, pleas, and imprecations. Clearly, he'd stumbled onto the cellar den of a lunatic.

"How's that? My name? My name is Kashrath, as everyone in this city well knows." He drew himself up.

"Ah. And this city—is this the City Zominor?"

"'The City Zominor'?" Kashrath repeated, parroting the words. "I've never heard the name. This is the City Rassanala."

"I am not in Zanor?"

"You simpleton! You are in the very Fortress Rassanala!" Kashrath seemed to draw strength from the fact.

"It would seem that I am not where I intended to be," Elron mused to himself.

"You're not where *I* intend you to be," Kashrath pronounced. He took another sliding step for the stairs.

"Hold on, you!" Elron said, jumping forward and catching the man by his skinny forearm. "You'll not be running out just yet." He pulled him toward the portal that stood near the wall. It was a virtual duplicate of the one he had entered.

"How does one use this thing properly?"

Kashrath had been slow of mind. It clearly dawned on him now for the first time that Elron had come through the portal.

"Aieee," he cried, fear drawing great beads of sweat to his face. His body stank of sweat and perfume, both stale. "You are come from another world! Oh, woe; oh, woe! We are doomed! My folly is rewarded! We are invaded from within!"

Fearful that the man's cries would continue indefinitely, Elron slapped him gently across the face.

"Where did you get this thing?"

"I—I found it in the ruins of the City Shanathor, across the river. It is my habit to go there in search of the forgotten magic of the Old Ones."

"The magic of the Old Ones."

"Yes, such as this portal to the nether world from which

you issued." He began babbling and bleating again, and Elron shook him.

"What do you use this portal for?" he asked.

"I—I have used it for the disposal of my unwanted, ahh, things. . . ."

"Like that object you broke."

"Ahh, yes. Oh, please, I realize I have been wrong to throw my litter into your world, great spirit. I—I shall never do it again. I swear it."

"Others have used this portal? Gone through it?"

The old man nodded. "Two. A girl and a man. I have never told the Rassanala. He would be most fearfully angry."

Elron nodded. "Then you needn't tell him about me, either." He released Kashrath and stepped back through the portal.

He was in a high room. It was bare but for a chair and a man who sat in it staring expectantly at him. As he had stepped through the portal, the man had looked up, startled, then risen, a smile forming on his face.

"Ah, Max! I—" he broke off in surprise. He was a sandy-haired, huge-nosed man, stocky but short—not more than five feet tall. His head sat directly upon his shoulders, and his face was lined and seamed. It gave him a mobile set of expressions, and his smile turned quickly into a look of alarm, and then one of uncertainty. He held a stout walking stick in his right hand, almost as he would a fighting staff. Elron sensed instantly that the man was alert, on his guard, and waiting for a sign of friendship or enmity.

Elron smiled and turned his hands palm up, empty. He was certain of himself now.

"I am not Max Quest," he said. "But I know who you are; he has told me. You are Hagendorf, and this is Zominor."

Hagendorf did not relax. "Max Quest has spoken of me to more than his friends. Prove yourself."

Elron was taken aback. Why was the little man so dis-

trustful? "Why, I am Elron, and I consider myself Max Quest's friend. He saved my life."

"Did he, now? Or did you come running here to escape him and to regain your powers?"

"Regain my powers? I know not what you mean, man. I came here for help, for assistance. I have come to see your Sorceress."

Hagendorf smiled, but it was not the smile he had worn before. This was a cold smile, a smile of doubts confirmed, a smile of hatred. He threw up his staff.

"Defend yourself, then, if you do not wish to be beaten to a witless pulp immediately. I am a fair man in battle, but the Sorceress you'll not see!"

Elron backed a step and his heel caught at the jamb of the portal. He shook his head. "But . . . I do not understand . . ."

The staff whistled out and caught him in his left thigh. He felt his leg begin to buckle, and fell back, bracing his hand against the portal frame.

"Back! Back! Begone with you!" Hagendorf shouted. "Go join your friends!" He advanced, flailing with his staff.

"No," Elron said. "I've come too far!" He sidestepped the portal and felt a wall behind him. Inwardly he seethed with anger and fear—anger that this man should seek to thwart him in his quest; fear that he might succeed. He drew his sword again and began to parry the other's blows.

He was handicapped by his left leg. The numbness was leaving it now, as he moved quickly around, out of Hagendorf's immediate range, but it was still stiff, and he could not put much weight upon it.

For a smaller man, Hagendorf showed no fear and little caution. Wielding only his wooden staff, he repeatedly advanced upon Elron, who, out of both confusion and respect for this man who had shared Max Quest's friendship, did little more than parry his blows with the flat of his sword.

But then the staff sailed in again, feinting for his head and clipping instead his right shoulder, almost causing

him to drop his sword, and through the pain he saw red. He threw restraint away as he tossed the sword from right to left hand and reversed his stance. It was a trick Hogun had once taught him, for confounding one's enemies.

It threw Hagendorf off-balance, and that was enough. Elron slashed with his sword, whittling chips from the staff, driving the smaller man back, and back again. The battle was reversed now, and it was Hagendorf who parried in his own defense, shielding himself with his swiftly moving staff, until . . .

With a sharp crack, Elron cut the staff in two. The free end sailed across the room and out the window. Hagendorf stared, stupefied, at the length of less than a foot that he still held. Then he drew back his arm to hurl the short club.

"Hold!" Elron said, his sword's point trapping the smaller man against the wall. "You will drop it, and you will surrender yourself. Failing that, friend or no friend of Max Quest, I shall have you spitted like a roast ham!"

Slowly, as though debating Elron's willingness to follow up on his threat, Hagendorf let his hand fall; his fingers opened, and the short piece of hard wood dropped to the floor.

"Very well, then," he said. "I am a man of my word. I surrender to you."

The fire in Elron's eyes dimmed then, and he stepped back, awkwardly sheathing his sword left-handedly. "All right." He nodded. "Suppose you explain yourself and your reasons for attacking a man who comes here in open-handed friendship." His tone was stern, and in it were traces of his offended pride and bewildered anger.

"Explain to me why you set upon me, Hagendorf."

Chapter Four

After Hagendorf had told his story, Elron stared moodily out the high window. Before him spread the vast City Zominor, a city greater and more grand than any he had ever imagined. In the distance was the deep blue tint of a vast body of water; closer at hand, broad avenues were lined with trees and plantings and tall buildings—he wondered at the audacity of their height; did not the wind threaten to topple them?—rising from parklike gardens, set back from the streets. Yet, there was a curiously deserted look to this vast city, for he saw few people or wagons moving in the streets below. And those he did see he at first refused to believe. They looked no bigger than tiny insects! Only the thickness of the wall that framed this window gave him courage to stand here and gaze out upon the city, for the height, once he realized its extent, frightened him greatly.

But he registered the sights he was seeing with only the surface of his mind. For what Hagendorf had told him troubled him very much.

Finally, he turned and regarded the homely little man once more. "I am dismayed," he said. "But now, more than before, I must meet your Sorceress."

The small man nodded.

The City Zominor, like its twin sister, Azanor, had been left relatively untouched by the great catastrophe that had swept across the world some two thousand years earlier. Zominor and Azanor did not fall into ruins. Isolated as they were upon the island continent of Zanor, they maintained their science and their culture while the rest of the world fell into decay and barbarism.

But the twin cities paid their own price. Intercourse with the rest of Qanar was shut off, and the people of

the two cities lost their interest in the outside world. Once the world's finest sailors and tradesmen, they allowed their fine ships to rust in the dockyards, while the matter transmitters that had once intimately linked all the major cities of the world were feared, distrusted, and entirely unused. In their isolation they began to forget, and although there were always those among them who trained as techmechs, to service their cybernetic servants and machines, the greater sciences and arts were lost. The people lapsed into quiet, sedentary lives, their needs tended to by servos, their pursuits genteelly degenerate.

As Dorf had told Max Quest, "New music is still written, and new paintings still painted. We see many new plays, for a play can occupy the minds and bodies of many. But—none of these recent works do more than echo the masterpieces of the past. We are dying, too, as surely in our own slow way as did the people of the mainland continents. We are the last blurred and diminishing echoes of the race that once ruled the world." The evidence was everywhere at hand, for Zominor had been built for millions, and now only ten thousand lived within its carefully maintained buildings.

The building in which Elron had found himself was Hagendorf's own—all of it. No other man had lived within it since Dorf had claimed it for himself, many years earlier. It had many floors he had never used, although, an inquisitive man, he had explored them all. The matter transmitter was an artifact and little more, and until the Sorceress herself had stepped from it, he had never given it more than passing thought, having stowed it in an empty room and almost forgotten it.

Then had come Max Quest, a strange man of immensely radiant power, whom he had instantly liked. Suddenly the long-disused portal was becoming well-trafficked. And after the most recent incident, Dorf had begun to fear that more strangers might issue from it at any time. He had kept the door to the room closed and locked except on those occasions when he found time to sit in a chair and regard the portal closely, skeptically.

He had not known until he had seen this tall, dark

man in stained and dirty leathers that he had been waiting, subconsciously hoping for the return of Max Quest. And then his disappointment that it was not Quest had made him suspicious—too suspicious, as it had turned out.

Elron followed Hagendorf down a long, windowed corridor to a shaft that seemed to plunge down almost without break to the bottom of the building. As he stared cautiously over the edge, the man beside him stepped unconcernedly out into the open shaft.

"Come—it's quite safe," Hagendorf called, as his head slowly disappeared below floor level.

Magic: it was obviously an example of the magic of this great city, and it was the first test to which he was being put. He felt fearful and alone, a stranger in a strange land. Yet to hang back now would be to exhibit cowardice. . . .

Hesitantly, he put a foot over the edge.

There was nothing there!

He had expected an invisible floor, sinking but solid, a platform on which he'd stand. But there had been nothing, nothing at all!

He tried to regain his balance, arms pinwheeling. Then he lost balance completely and fell over.

The bottom dropped from the pit of his stomach, and he felt himself falling. He closed his eyes and tensed himself against an impact he knew he could not survive.

Nothing happened.

He opened first one, then both eyes.

A doorway, leading onto a windowed corridor identical to the one from which he'd come, moved slowly up and past him. His body felt curiously light, feathery. And yet his stomach, his balance organs—all screamed that he was falling! He looked down.

Immediately he wished he hadn't. The view was vertiginous—the shaft fell away below him for counless stories, each marked off by the diminishing rectangles of light that were doorways. Far below, the squat figure of Hagendorf was suspended. The distance between them did not narrow; they were falling at the same slow pace.

Now he looked up, his curiosity reviving as his fear ebbed. The shaft extended as far up as it did down. The top was only a tiny square.

The corridors he was slipping past now were no longer bare and featureless. One was lined with paintings that were great rectangular splashes of color. Each had long rugs upon its floor, and some had small pieces of luxurious furniture. He was still craning his neck to see into a corridor now too far above him, when his feet touched something solid, and as he bounced up again from it, he looked down to see a solid floor and realized he had touched bottom.

Dorf reached into the shaft and pulled him out by his arm. The man seemed impatient, and hurried off quickly down the hall.

Elron had little time to notice the subdued lighting, the rich furnishings, or the elaborate rooms that opened off the hallway as he ran after the smaller man.

"What—what was that thing?" he asked breathlessly, as he fell in step with Dorf.

"Thing? What thing?"

"Ah, where we came down, I mean. The hole down which we fell so slowly."

"Oh yes," Dorf said with a wintry smile. "I forgot you were unused to civilization. That was a delevitator. It makes one relatively weightless. Interesting, eh?"

Elron agreed, certain that Hagendorf had forgotten nothing. It was his way of reasserting his superiority over Elron. "But when you wish to go up?"

"I have a levitator, as well. Same principle."

"There is no danger?"

"None. None whatsoever."

"What if—if the enchantment were broken?"

"Enchantment? Don't be superstitious, boy. There's magic of the Sorceress' sort, we have that—but this is plain and simple scientific engineering. It runs from the city power source, not enchantments."

"I am not familiar with all the words you used, Hagendorf," Elron said, his cheeks glowing hotly, "but do not patronize me. I am not a fool, for all my ignorance of

your ways. Besides . . . what if this city power source you mentioned were to—to stop?"

Dorf stared up at him from under craggy brows and lengthened his stride. "Don't start thinking about it."

The hall led to a vast open room in which were parked what looked at first like little boats. But these short, snub-nosed little vehicles had *wheels*—two at one end and one at the other. Their skin was smooth, rounded, and shiny, and when he felt of one as he passed it, Elron found it to be hard and cold—metallic.

Dorf led him to one that was a bright, shiny yellow. He worked a handle and opened a door whose seam had been all but invisible. Inside, two seats were nestled. Elron found his entrance difficult, and his sword an additional encumberance. Sighing, he unbuckled it and placed it across his knees.

With the door closed, he felt confined within the closeness of the vehicle. He looked out through the window, a strange transparent crystal, and watched Dorf go around the car to open the other door and slide in beside him.

"Pardon, Hagendorf," Elron said; "you may consider me ignorant, but are you not going to hitch the beasts, or will this too be done by magic?"

Dorf broke into open laughter. "Why," he choked out between laughs, "I haven't met such a one as you in all my life!"

Elron unsheathed his dagger. "Your life may be approaching an abrupt ending, friend. Have the courtesy to remain civil, if this is not beyond your sophistication."

Dorf calmed himself. "Enough; put that thing away. I'll answer your question. Look!"

He moved his foot upon a small pedal on the floorboard, and Elron was observing this action so closely that the sudden soundless movement of the little car came as a total shock. He snapped his eyes up to see the room reeling before them, the car's snubbed nose swinging past stationary cars, up a ramp, and out into the dazzle of sunshine on the street—all without a pulling beast and at

fantastic speed. His grip on his belt and sword tightened until his knuckles were white.

Magic! The magic of this place robbed him of his wits. It did not pose direct threats, as had the magic of Edwards and the silent Archer—it stole his dignity. The magic of Zominor was a servile thing, a convenience the people of this place were born to. And it was a bad thing to be humbled by one's servants. He had bested this man Hagendorf in combat, proving his strength, wit, and skill in the process, but now the man laughed openly at him for his wide-eyed ignorance and wonder at the marvels Hagendorf found only commonplace.

His ears smarted. In this place he was cast in the role of buffoon. He was becoming a laughable fool. If he was to meet the Sorceress and sway her to his needs, he could not present such a picture of ridicule.

He resolved, as they sped through the broad and almost empty streets, that he would accept the wonders and the magic of this place pragmatically. He would not blunder about with his eyes closed, but he would not hang back like a frightened child, either. He was not stupid; he was observant. He would have to learn to accept, as these people accepted it, the servile role of magic here.

They turned a corner, and then, facing them at the end of the short avenue, was the building Elron knew must be their destination.

It towered high above the trees that lined the avenue, a featureless black cube. It was, he decided, as tall as any building he had seen in this city, but vastly more huge, since it appeared as wide as it was tall.

The sun was still high in the sky here, but the building was the blackest black he had ever set his eyes upon. Indeed, it hurt his eyes to gaze steadily upon it.

"Most impressive sight in all Zominor," Dorf said. "This is the Hall of the Sorceress."

Elron said nothing. He was awed; yet he did not care to betray his emotions.

"It is also the powerhouse of the city," Hagendorf added. "The blackness you see—it is caused by the fact that the

walls, all the externally exposed surfaces, absorb radiation. They absorb radiation on all wavelengths."

"Then, they absorb light?" Elron asked.

"Light, heat, everything. They absorb it all. They reflect nothing."

"I see. Then, from this comes all the, ah, 'power' for your city?"

"Yes. Everything is supplied by this building—even this car. It uses broadcast power."

"It uses the power within itself?"

"It has a small engine, located behind us. It drives the rear wheels. I steer with the front one."

"I see."

"I doubt it," Hagendorf replied dryly. He made a sharp cut to the left and brought the car up short, parallel to the curb. "The doorhandle is that sliding bar near your right hand," he said. "Just pull on it."

The Sorceress Shannara sat desultorily before a mirror in her private apartment, combing her long black hair. It was an affectation, she knew, but one she had grown fond of. She had little patience for the people who lived in this city now, but yet she could not refrain from flaunting herself at them, from playing the role of "Sorceress" to the hilt.

She felt moody and despondent. She had felt this way since the time, roughly a week earlier, when the two strangers had appeared in the city seeking her, their bedraggled clothes and haggard condition testifying to the truth of their story that they had come over the mountains from the desert Outlands.

She felt filthy, soiled by their contaminating touch, and she had taken many baths since, seeking to rid herself of the feeling they had left her with.

She examined her features in the long mirror, bored by them but as yet unwilling to renounce her pride in her appearance.

Her long hair was among her best features—worth in vanity, at least, the care it required. It framed her rather patrician face, softening and rounding a chin she some-

times decided, critically, was too sharp, and accenting in counterpoint her large dark blue eyes. Her nose was broad but straight. Her mouth was small, but with a lower lip that verged on overfullness and often seemed to pout, quite against her wishes.

It seemed to her ironic that the image she presented best was that of a ripe, rather spoiled-looking, very feminine woman. She seemed bred for the bedroom—her expression was usually sultry, especially when she was in a mood as low as this one.

Looks could be deceiving. She was not a virgin—had not been since her fourteenth birthday, over three thousand years ago as time was measured, or ten years ago as she had actually lived it—and did not regret the fact. But she was not a plaything for any man with bedroom lusts. Indeed, she had not slept with any man at all since she had come to this place and time. Of them all, only old Hagendorf interested her, and he seemed to treat her like a goddess upon a pedestal, a situation that sometimes annoyed her very much. But she was resigned to it now.

She regarded herself as an independent, firm-willed woman whose mind was the equal of any man's. She was proud of her training and bemused by the exalted position it had brought her here. She was, after all, little more than a mechtech by vocation—but one with thrice the training of the poor incompetents they called mechtechs here.

She stood and regarded the rest of her nude body, stray drops from the bath still glistening upon it.

The skin was smooth; she was proud of that. She had retained her body complexion. Her hips were perhaps a shade too large in proportion to her breasts (what was it Anath had said to her, three thousand years ago? "You'll be fine breeding stock, my dear; no trouble with childbirth at all!") but her breasts were, if not large, full and rounded, firm with as yet no sag.

It was a pretty showcase, she thought. And for what? There was not a man in this miserable city to make a gift of it to. They were all—Hagendorf excepted, of

course, the ugly little pet—too weak, too abstracted by their own thoughts and petty problems. There was not a one of them fit to be alive—and, of course, they were not truly alive, at that.

She pirouetted, her still-damp hair fanning out around her. She peered coquettishly over her shoulder at her reflection, then scowled at it and abandoned the empty game. She was bored with herself, and angry, too. She had sensed the power and the purpose of that man, Max Quest, and she had known too that he was not for her, and she had of necessity let him slip through her fingers. It only accented the thin and pointless life that remained for her. And now even that was soiled. . . .

The communimech in the next room emitted a soft buzz, then said, "A message for my lady."

"What is it?" she called, moving across the heavy carpet for her wardrobe.

"Hagendorf is here with a stranger who, he says, is quite insistent to see you. They await you below," the mechanical voice said.

"Tell them I will see them shortly," she said, as she sorted through her gowns. She was not particularly interested in a visit from either Hagendorf or some fawning stranger just now, but it would be necessary to go through the motions.

"You may go in now," the communimech said.

Elron came quickly to his feet, his nervousness making his movements overeager. His sword and belt he left behind in the seat he had vacated. Hagendorf rose sourly to join him.

"Mind your manners, now," he muttered, but Elron did not react to the slight.

The door swung open as they approached it, and a thin chill slid down Elron's back as he was reminded of the gates that had closed behind him in the Duke's manse. But, side by side, he advanced with Hagendorf, to stand in the center of a low-ceilinged, windowless room. They were somewhere lost deep within the vastness of this im-

mense building, he knew, and the thought of it pressed a weight down upon his shoulders.

The floor was richly carpeted, as had been all the floors he had stridden upon in this building. It felt like a thick, close-cropped pasture lawn. His feet seemed to sink into it.

There was little furniture in the room, and no chairs for them on this side of the desk that dominated the room. The desk itself seemed to be an obsidian block, several yards wide and perhaps a yard deep. It was difficult to be certain of the latter dimension, however—the room seemed to be divided into light and shadow, the line of demarcation falling along the far edge of the desk. While Elron and Hagendorf stood under the soft, even illumination of the glowing ceiling panels, the room beyond the desk was deep in murky shadow, a gloom too deep for Elron's eyes to penetrate.

At first he thought they were still alone in the strange room, but then his eyes caught a movement behind the desk. A form was sitting there, shapeless, garbed entirely in black, even her face veiled.

So this was the Sorceress! What lay beyond the folds of cloth that masked her? Was she an old woman, no longer sound enough in body to move about? Suddenly the audacity of his mission overwhelmed him. What had he been thinking of, to come this long way, into this land of everyday marvels, to seek the help of its ruler? Yet perhaps, from what Hagendorf had told him, she would not be totally unreceptive to his plea.

"And I am not," came a clear, cool voice from out of the shadows. "Step forth, Elron, and tell me of your mission in your own words."

His knees threatened to buckle. She had read his mind! Yet she asked him to tell it all to her anyway. Despite his strength of will, he found himself trembling. What manner of creature must this Sorceress be?

"I will set your mind at ease," the voice said. Slowly, a spot of light appeared in the dark ceiling over the veiled figure, and he could begin to distinguish her hooded form

behind the desk. The light grew in intensity, until it spotlighted her. Then, with a matter-of-fact movement, she lifted the veil and threw back her hood, tossing her head with an automatic gesture to free her hair.

He moved toward her without the awareness that he was doing so. Her large, soft eyes caught his. Her eyes were blue, but color seemed to whirl in those deep pools, the blue shifting into a gray, and then to green, then blue again.

"You—you're beautiful!" he breathed.

She smiled. "So your gaze reflects. . . ." She seemed caught in the same trance that held him, and her smile was a ray of sunshine that illuminated the path between them.

"Hrrrumph," Hagendorf coughed. "The mission, Elron. Tell her your mission!" His voice was sharp.

It broke the spell, and Elron thought he detected irritation in the Sorceress' glance at Hagendorf, but she said soothingly, "Yes—your mission, Elron. Tell it to me."

Chapter Five

He felt lightheaded, curiously intoxicated. He seemed to have no control over his tongue, and he was certain, in that part of him which always sat back and observed his human follies, that he was again making a babbling fool of himself.

He told the Sorceress of the coming of the two warlocks, Edwards and Archer, and of how they had thrown their net of enchantment in a strange, chill fog over the City Qar, of how he had escaped them, and how he had recalled Max Quest's story of a city in a land of magic

where a Sorceress ruled, and had decided to come to her for help.

"You used the matter transmitters?" she interrupted in shocked tones.

"The doorways? Yes, milady. And now I find I am not alone in their use. Hagendorf tells me that the two usurpers, Edwards and Archer, came from *here*."

Shannara had listened to the tall, dark-bearded man with both her mind and her ears, skimming the thoughts and feelings from the surface of his mind and fitting into their context the story he told. She did this automatically: it was her one real talent, a tele-empathic ability that had been too erratic to be trustworthy in her home time but had been greatly amplified somehow in the malfunction of a transmitter that had thrown her across time instead of space—three thousand years into her own future.

She had stepped through a portal quite matter-of-factly, intending to travel only from Paraganat to Shanathor, a distance of a mere two thousand or so miles. Instead, she found herself in the dying shell of the once-proud Zominor, former trade center of all Qanar.

Her training had not emphasized her uncertain psi function—it had rated too poorly. Instead, she had trained as a scientech: a position not unlike that of today's mechtech, except that she was highly trained in the theory of the sciences, as well as in their engineering applications. She knew both theory and practice. Paraganat was the scientific center of Qanar, and there she had trained in the universities. The projected trip to Shanathor had been intended as a brief vacation.

Here in Zominor, her psi faculties had amplified and grown to such an extent that they were a sixth sense for her; and her scientific training was regarded with equal awe. She was quickly recognized as a master of the Great Arts long forgotten by the people of Zanor, and her ability to sense surface thoughts and emotions in those around her had lent her a mystical quality. This she had parlayed into the role of Sorceress: not truly a ruler, for these people were too apathetic to require one, but an honored

role—advice-giver, worker of small magics, practitioner of the Great Arts.

She had thought of leaving the city, but the ships were rusting on the bottom of the harbor, none of the small cars would run far beyond the city limits and the effective radius of the broadcast power, and she would never trust herself in a transmitter portal again. She was trapped, in the open city of Zominor. But from what little she could find out about the rest of the world, this appeared no real loss. For a cataclysm had occurred—history did not record its nature, but she suspected that it had been a plague—which had wiped out most of humanity upon the rest of the globe only a thousand years after her own time. More recently the sun had grown hotter, turning habitable parts of the world along the equator into heat-seared deserts and melting the northern ice caps, raising the sea level and drowning many coastal areas.

Then, only a week ago, two men had appeared, strangers from the Outlands beyond the mountains—an arid land where little grew and few lived. Both men appeared haggard and worn. One was a giant, the other a shorter man whose skin hung on his frame in loose folds. Their clothes were makeshift, ill-fitting, and, she suspected, stolen.

The smaller one had done the talking.

"We seek a great favor of you," he had said. "We are magicians, placed under a false enchantment and far from our own world. . . ."

His thoughts and emotions had woven a more sinister pattern around his words, however. She caught glimpses of fear and hatred, covert anger, laced with malice, and, overriding them all, greed. His thoughts seemed deliberately unfocused beyond the words he shaped and spoke, but, behind the phrase "false enchantment," she had caught a sudden flash of Max Quest and this man's fearful hatred of Quest. The giant had said nothing, but she'd turned her attention to him. His mind had seemed at first blank and featureless, as placid as a grazing ewe's. But then she dipped deeper into the pool and felt herself recoiling in physical shock.

"Are you ill?" the wheezy voice had asked, and she had murmured something about the food she had eaten —and she wished indeed she had eaten nothing that day, so revolted was her physical system. She made no further attempt to probe the giant's mind.

". . . your machines," the smaller man was saying.

"My—machines?"

"Just so. With their aid, I believe we can rid ourselves of our, ah, enchantments. We will be quite grateful."

Then she saw quite clearly who and what they were.

When Max Quest had come to this place, she had sensed about him immediately that he was not of this world. He seemed both of and not of it, as though improperly aligned with the axis of Qanar's reality: askew.

He had explained it to her later. His universe was not physically a part of Qanar's universe, but rather one of an infinity of universes that coexisted, multiple noncongruent realities. His translation into the reality of Qanar had been incomplete. His body had remained on his own world, while his spirit, or thetan, had found an outwardly identical body on this world.

But Quest had evolved beyond humanity on his home world of Earth. His perceptions reached beyond the surface of reality, and he had gained the ability to manipulate energy and matter.

He lost all this through his partial conversion into the universe that contained Qanar. Here, he retained a physical toughness that was greater than human, but his perceptions and abilities were blunted and dulled to human scope.

She had sensed this and found a way to help him. She had placed him in a machine that duplicated some of the functions of the transmitters. The transmitters thrust one into the unreality between universes, outside matter, energy, space, and time, only to draw one back again, at another point in space where there was a receiver. Temporal travel had not been dreamed of before the accident that had brought Shannara to this time, but it had always been theoretically possible.

In this machine, Max regained his powers and became once more supernormal.

But once out of the machine, he found that he could use his powers only to his own disadvantage, that the energy they required must necessarily come from his own being and from nowhere else with this reality-framework. He did what he needed to do to complete his task on this world, but he did it at the price of his own strength. A simple act of healing, such as he had practiced upon the battle-wounded Elron, had wearied him greatly.

Shannara had last seen Max when he left her to return to the portal. He would be able to use his newly regained powers freely between the portals now, and to use the transmitters to go wherever he chose, she knew. For him, they would work without malfunction.

Just as she had recognized the out-of-phase quality in Max Quest, she recognized it now in these two men. They too were not of this universe. But while Quest was a man of strength and integrity, a man she had only to meet to be drawn toward him, these two Others were creatures of deviousness, men—or once-men—corrupted by their powers into evil caricatures. As the smaller had spoken, his thoughts had revealed his deceit. The larger . . . his mind was a black pool of filth she would never again attempt access to.

Yet she knew not just who and what they were. These were Max Quest's enemies, from his home world—the enemies he had cast into this world to live out the remainder of their mortal lifespans shorn of their corrupting powers.

And they had come to her to regain their powers, so that they might return once more to their own world to resume their plundering of its people.

"No!" Her cry rang out with such a strength of protest that she was herself startled.

"I—I mean, I don't know what it is you want, but I cannot help."

"You mean you *will* not help. Do not try to deceive me, little lady." His tone was soft and cloying. "I can see into you as easily as you can into me."

"You're lying."

"Ah, well, not perhaps in the same way as you, but I can read you easily, my dear—quite easily." He leaned closer to her, and instinctively she retreated. "I know who and what you are, Shannara," he said, his voice now confidential. "I know you are a fraud and can no more work magic than any of the people of this sad city. You have the rudimentary ability to sense the feeling of those in close proximity. That is all. You are no real sorceress, and the so-called magic of this world is only superstition coupled with lingering evidences of science.

"Look into my mind, dear girl, and you will see that I am sincere. I wish only to regain that which is mine. We will not remain here to trouble you. Help us, and we shall do no more than bid you good day."

"No," she said. "I have looked into your mind. All I see are lies and corruption. Deceit—you weave lies among your own lies. As for who I am, what I am, I fulfill a need here, and that is something you could not destroy."

"Shannara," he said, shaking his head, "I am troubled for you. Your stubbornness and your vanity will be your downfall, you know. Shannara, I know about the machines you used on Max Quest. They must be used also on us!"

She folded her arms. "No," she said quietly.

He nodded at the other.

"I regret this," he said to her, and the silent giant took her arm and began to bend it.

She felt her muscles twisting, straining, and she began biting her lip, but she did not cry out. She did not give in.

"Shannara, Shannara," the small man cried. "When will you cease this torture?"

She replied by kicking him quite accurately, and with some force, in his crotch. He gave a sharp, mewling scream and fell to the carpet clutching himself.

The giant retaliated. He separated the little finger of her right hand and bent it backward until it broke. He did not relax his grip on her arms, but held her pinned and defenseless against him.

On the floor, the smaller man was retching, and his sunburnt face was gray and splotchy.

She always regretted, thereafter, that she had not kicked much harder, that she had not crippled him for life—or perhaps killed him.

She tasted the saltiness of her own blood, and knew that she had bitten through her own lip. But she had made no sound. She would acquiesce to nothing.

The giant held her motionless for many long moments while she debated on what she might do. She thought of the communimech, but there was no one within hearing of its extensions. She was not within reach of her desk control-console, and besides, she had no weapons: she had never expected to be attacked.

Time passed. Then the smaller man rose grimly on shaking legs to confront her once again.

"Bitch!" he said, backhanding her across her face. His hand hardly stung: it was only a welcome diversion from the throbbing, swelling pain in her right hand. Then he reached out with both hands, hooked them in the neck of her gown, and pulled. The front of the gown ripped free, exposing her scanty undergarments.

He fished in a pocket, then pulled forth a folding knife. He opened it.

"Since the more gentle modes of persuasion have not sufficed," he wheezed thinly, "we shall have to be more direct. I might add—should you try anything like that again, Archer will break another finger for each attempt. Now, then—are you proud of your breasts?"

He slid the knife under the thin strip of cloth that joined the cups of her bra, and cut it. The brassiere parted, revealing the ripe fullness of her breasts to his unblinking gaze.

"Do not think that I derive anything personal from this, my dear," he said. "I have seen and touched and used the bodies of a thousand young females more attractive than you. I am doing this purely as an expedient. Look into my mind—see if I am lying."

She did. As his knife approached her left nipple, she looked into his mind and read his intentions, and they were bold and simple: he would mutilate her, inch by inch, until she acquiesced and agreed to their demands.

He would carve her body, using shallow cuts, the kind most painful and most disfiguring, starting first with her breasts, then moving slowly down her body. He would score her back, her buttocks, her legs and arms, and finally her face. And, had she not relented by then, he would continue, making deeper cuts, until she died. And should she die, he would be unconcerned. He knew what to look for; he and his companion would find the machine for themselves and use it in turn on each other. Indeed, there was nothing to stop him from knocking her unconscious or killing her now and immediately beginning the search, but he was motivated by a lustful sort of pride, and it was important to him to break her will. He wanted to break her will because she, a mere human, had dared strike out at him—and, worse, had hurt him badly. He would enjoy hurting her, humbling her, breaking her down. She could see he was looking forward to the task, hoping she would not break too soon, but certain she would resist indefinitely.

Her first impulse was to be a martyr, to die without speaking. She could do it, she was convinced. She had the power of will.

But a part of her screamed out in rebellion. This was madness: a pride that went beyond foolishness. This is suicide! She did not want to die, lips sealed or babbling, body disfigured or whole. She wanted to live. Call it selfishness, but most of her adult life lay yet ahead of her. Could she sign her own death warrant so easily?

Once, as a small child, she had been drawn to a potter's kiln and had looked through a small door into an interior that glowed with heat. And she had had an impulse almost beyond her control to thrust her hand into that kiln. For months thereafter, the experience had fascinated and repelled her with its morbidity.

Now she faced again the cherry-red kiln: a knife in the hands of a dedicated madman. His knife was like a dare, taunting her with pain and death.

But a part of her mind remained cool and sane: the part of her mind that had withheld her hand from the furnace. There was another way to cheat this man, a way

that would spare her body and her life, and deny him his sport.

The knife cut a thin, neat line across the underside of her breast.

"Stop," she said. "You win. I shall do as you wish."

In his mind she saw anger vie with elation. Neither won; he simply closed the knife and said quiet calmly, "That was very wise, Shannara."

And so she had given the two back their powers, although in a more limited form, and she knew that she had betrayed Max Quest. And for all her rationalizations, a deep shame burned within her. The two had gone to Hagendorf's building, entered the portal, and disappeared. Once within the portal, she knew they could find their own universe and return to it. She had rid her world of a menace and saved her life. She had little more than that to be proud of.

And now this fiercely intense and barbaric man had come through the portal—through the matter transmitters!—to tell her that she had saved only her own skin. She felt like weeping.

Instead, she asked, "And what do you wish of me?"

"I came to beg your help, the resources of your great magic, to banish them," he said. "I . . . I had not known it was you who gave them their great powers." His voice broke off, bitterly. She saw the confusion, the pain of disappointment in his thoughts. She felt his awareness of her as a woman, the feedback twisting a knife in her stomach, further abrading the excoriation of her own shame.

But it was Hagendorf who replied, his tone stinging, "Watch your tongue, you young fool! Don't you think that we knew their evil—too late? Do you thing that I would allow another of them to approach our Sorceress, to compromise her with his foulness, his threats?"

Shannara smiled, a sad smile. "But we failed, Dorf. And that is the proof this man brings us. We have betrayed him, and his people. But not," she said directly to Elron, "intentionally. They said they would leave this world, that

they had no use for it. I know they were not lying then. Something must have happened, to hold them here on Qanar."

"Then I repeat myself: can you—will you—help me?"

She stared deep into his eyes, and, through them, into his soul. She read there, as though through a deep and transparent pool of water, his desires, his drives, his longings. She saw his fierce loyalty to his Duke and his people, the strength of his courage, the honesty of his nature. And she saw also his disillusionment with his life as an adventurer, his inner sensitivity, his need for the security of home and family. He was older than she, and despite his ignorance of the marvels of Zanor, his life had been rich in experience. She saw in Elron a man: a man of strength and character the like of whom she had never met in Zominor. She saw in Elron the first man she could regard with open admiration since she had so briefly known Max Quest.

What was it he was asking of her? Could it be any less than reparation? She had unleashed those two menacing Others upon the unknowing populace of Qanar. Could she do less than seek their defeat?

Dared she refuse her help? She, who carried the shame and guilt of their ascension upon her own shoulders?

Slowly, as though unwillingly, she nodded. "Yes," she said. "I'll go with you. I'll help you."

"Sorceress!" cried Hagendorf in anguish.

Hagendorf had maps, and through Elron's description of landmarks, he located the position of City Qar. It was halfway around the world.

There was but one way by which they might return: the very transmitter portal that had brought Elron here.

Hagendorf had argued against it. The portals were uncertain. Although they still functioned, their circuits were old, and their use was dangerous. He knew of no one native to Qanar—save Elron himself—who had successfully used the portals. He was adamant.

And Shannara was equally stubborn. They were going. If the portals were the only way, then they must needs

use them. After all, she pointed out, Elron had used them safely. And, she admitted to herself, it was an omen, in a sense, for the portals had brought her here, and she alone had been responsible for unleashing the two evil Others upon the world. She could be asked no less than to brave the portals once more.

They amassed supplies: knapsacks with food and water for the march to Qar—they could not count on finding Elron's beast still about, and by foot the journey from Tanakor would take twice as long—as well as the tiny cell-like powerpacks for the handguns Hagendorf dourly brought forth from the city armory. These small weapons, which fitted neatly into a man's hand, astounded Elron. One depressed a stud, and a needle-like beam of flickering heat would dart forth, carving obstacles and enemies alike. It was a marvelous piece of magicry, and he played with one for several hours, practicing its aim and learning its range—it was difficult not to compensate automatically for an arc of trajectory on more distant shots—while Hagendorf and the Sorceress argued back and forth, neither of them, as nearly as he could tell, budging an inch.

Elron was not certain of his feelings toward the Sorceress. He had been prejudiced against her after Hagendorf had told him in that high room that Edwards and Archer had been here, had mistreated her until she had lifted from them an enchantment that had been placed upon them by Max Quest, and then had left via the portal. They had come to the ruins of Tanakor, he was convinced of that. His memory had not deceived him; they had enlarged the hole when they had climbed out of the underground rooms.

He had been fearful, and prepared to dislike the Sorceress; he had expected her to rebuff him.

Then she had surprised him. She had surprised him first by revealing herself to be a beautiful young woman, and not at all the old crone he had fully expected. She had surprised him more by the intimacy of her contact with him, the way she seemed to know his thoughts and to stare deeply into him. This might have made him resentful, but he sensed no hostility in her, only warmth and

sympathy. She had drawn him out, and she had not scorned or ridiculed him, as Hagendorf most certainly would have, had he been in her place.

And finally she had startled him by accepting his plea, by agreeing to go with him to City Qar. "City" Qar . . . the name seemed vain and foolish to him now, after having glimpsed a real city. But yet the menace of the Others was real enough. He doubted that she would laugh, upon seeing City Qar. . . .

They stood, the three of them, in the bare and empty room. Elron wore his sword and two energy guns. The Sorceress wore a rugged sporting outfit, a single-piece jump-suit of gray-green that fitted over her body almost indecently well. She too wore an energy gun in her belt. Both carried small knapsacks on their backs. Before them was the gleaming surface of the portal. Hagendorf was scowling but silent.

Elron opened the portal, and the Sorceress reached out and took his hand. Then, before either could move, Hagendorf impulsively took her other hand, kissed it, and fled through the doorway.

"He does not wish to see you go," Elron said.

"He is jealous of you," Shannara replied.

Then they stepped together into the portal.

The heat struck them like a fist, staggering them back against the portal. Bars of sunlight were etched in dazzling white upon the floor, and through the window beyond there was nothing but a shimmering glare.

Elron tried to draw a breath, and the hot, dry air parched and scorched his mouth. The very room was like a furnace.

He did not know where they were, but it was clearly not Tanakor.

Chapter Six

"ELRON!" Shannara was looking up at him, wide-eyed, her lips parted, all but panting in the fierce heat. "This is not the place, is it?"

"No. No, I have never seen it before."

"We must go back; the transmitter has malfunctioned again."

She pressed out the coordinates on the filigreed buttons of the door, then opened it. Elron came quickly to stand beside her, and once more she clasped his large hand in her own. Then they stepped into the portal.

For Elron, the sensation this time was quite different; it was akin to that of stepping through the mirror—like a viscous membrane pressed against his face and body, resilient but clinging. But the harder he tried to step through, the harder it pushed back against him. Next to him, he could feel the Sorceress struggling.

It was no good; something held them back. *They could not return through the portal.*

They stepped back into the ovenlike room. Already Elron was feeling weak, his head throbbing with a dull pain. The heat was sapping his strength, and he had been on his feet now for nearly twenty-four hours.

"It won't accept us," Shannara said. Her face was sweaty. "There must be something wrong with the transmitter." She closed the door and stared at the controls. Then she dug into a pouch at her belt and produced two thin tools. With these she began working at the doorfront, and shortly she had a small panel removed and was staring into the interior. She seemed to poke about aimlessly with her fingers, but within a few moments she turned to Elron.

"Here's the trouble," she said, holding out her hand. On her fingertips was a reddish dust. "The sending circuit—

there's nothing left of it but red powder. The receiving circuit is still whole, but just barely. It's very brittle, and a good jar could take care of it. It must be the heat; these circuit boards were never intended for this kind of heat. It might've happened when the door closed behind us, you know—right after we came through. Or it might have happened years ago."

Her face was flushed, an unhealthy rosy color that he suspected mirrored his own. Already the heat was taking its toll.

"Have you any idea where we are?"

"I'll see if I can make anything out from the window," she said, moving to one of the side windows through which the sun did not shine directly.

He joined her and stared out, his eyes slitted, upon a scene he had never imagined, even in his worst nightmares.

Tall buildings, not unlike those of Zominor, thrust up here and there past the level of their window. But below there were no streets. The wide canyons between the buildings were choked with sand. Sand in high drifts was everywhere. There was no wind now, but if the sharp ridges of the drifts were any indication, a high wind must blow here at times.

The sand was nearly white, and it reflected the bright glare of the white sun so brilliantly that Elron found spots before his eyes when he closed them for relief. Heat, too, seemed to beat at them from the sand, thrusting them back from the open window. When he looked again, he saw something he had missed at first: not all the buildings stood. Some of them had toppled and lay on their sides, half-buried, or leaned against their neighbors. And even those standing were deeply pitted and eroded, in some places their walls sliced through by the eroding sand.

This was a place long lost to the elements.

Shannara gave a cry of surprise, and he moved over to the window where she now stood. It faced out upon the water.

This was the most incredible sight of all, for here they could see a great sky-blue bay stretching out to the horizon. But the waters did not stop at the city's edge—they

lapped a beach no more than a quarter mile away, and tall buildings and the stumps of others rose from the clear, placid waters for yet another mile.

"I know where we are," Shannara said.

"Where?"

"This must be the City Vagar, the equatorial city. We could not have picked a worse place."

" 'Equatorial'—what does that mean?"

"It means we have found the hottest place on all Qanar."

The sun was still in the east; it was early morning here. In his odyssey across the face of Qanar, Elron had twice cheated nightfall.

Vagar, the only city directly on the equator, sat between two great mountain ranges, one to the east, the other to the west. The desert basin had once been a fertile land, and Vagar had enjoyed a good trade, especially with its neighbor to the far south, the mysterious Ialla, where the unseen Arath had come to trade with the humans.

But Vagar, always a city that sizzled with heat in the sunlit hours, had become parched and burnt when the sun had grown hotter, and the land baked into sand.

The daytime temperatures here climbed above the 140-degree mark regularly. The city was now totally unfit for human habitation.

"Another few hours of this heat," Shannara said weakly, "and I shall pass out."

"The sun is still rising, you say? Then we have not yet felt its full strength."

"I don't think we can take it. Elron . . ." She put her hand on his and gazed at him. "Elron, we shall die here. I am sorry."

He shrugged her hand loose. "We have some food, some water. We won't die just yet. Not so long as we have a little strength—a little hope. Stairs," he added abruptly. "Has this place stairs, would you think?"

She struggled weakly to her feet and followed him into a hall, and thence to a shaft like those in Hagendorf's

building, a shaft where once there had been a levitator or delevitator.

"No good," Elron said. "Did the fools trust completely in their precious magic, or did they have a little foresight? Are there any stairs in this damned building?"

At last he found narrow stairs, behind an unmarked door, and they started down.

Elron guessed they had been at least ten stories above the level of the sand, and he had no way of knowing how much higher they'd been from actual ground-level. He was uncertain of what they could do, but he remembered the Duke's vaults, those subterranean chambers which remained cool even throughout the summer. If this city had been built for a hot climate to begin with, perhaps the lower levels might still be liveable. He could only hope.

Shannara shared his hope, having plucked his thoughts from his mind without asking them. It seemed to her scant hope, for they could not expect to live indefinitely beneath the shifting sands, and all too soon their food would be gone. But even a temporary respite from the heat that smote her now, sapping away her vitality and making her as weak as a baby, would be a welcome thing. Starvation was a problem she could worry about later.

It did get cooler, but not until they had descended several levels below the surface of the sand. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Elron had to throw his weight against the door to edge it open, for the floor of the corridor beyond was over a foot deep in sand.

Shannara had her handflash out now, its pale beam cutting through the dustmotes in the still air. No light from above penetrated this low, and even the heat was endurable here, for the worst of it was absorbed by the sand, and the closed-off air provided further insulation.

The first door Elron opened was to a room more than half-filled with sand, the slope rising from the door sill to a point near the ceiling at the far end of the room. Shannara flashed her light briefly about; then they closed the door. A high open window had allowed the sand to

deluge the room. They would have to hope for a room without windows, or with panes that had withstood the pressure of tons of sand.

They settled for a small room three doors down, which had no windows and only a thin layer of dust upon the floor. Better yet, it was furnished—or so was Elron's impression when Shannara first pointed her light into the room.

A low cabinet lined one wall, its counter top running waist-high along the length of the room. Across the room from it was a long, low divan, and in other corners sat comfortable-appearing chairs.

Shannara set her handflash upon the countertop, angled to reflect from the ceiling, and Elron let himself relax into one of the chairs.

The chair promptly collapsed into a pile of splinters and rags. Shannara's silver-pealed laughter filled the room as Elron looked up, his expression vexed.

But as he climbed again to his feet, his face relaxed into a smile. "It is more sad than funny, though," he said as the two stared down at the remains of the chair. "These must be the fragile remnants of a people long dead. Somehow, this touches me more than just the sight of fallen buildings."

"Yes," Shannara said. "Once, this was a room where people like you and me sat about and relaxed, talking, reading, thinking . . . people lived here. And now even their furniture falls into dust."

Elron bent, picked up a scrap of cloth, and fingered it. It disintegrated in his fingers. He kicked at the divan. Its leg collapsed, and the sudden jar brought it entirely to the floor.

"It's the heat and the dryness," Shannara said. "It had turned everything to dust." She did not add her unvoiced thought: *And soon, even us.*

"We are both tired," Elron said. "We must sleep till dusk." He took off his knapsack and put it on the floor. Then he lay down, using the knapsack as a pillow. "Best douse your lamp," he said; then he closed his eyes and was quickly asleep.

Shannara stared down at him. How calm he seemed. He had ordered his thoughts toward their immediate problem—the heat and their fatigue—and dealt with them. She could tell he feared for their lives; yet he seemed able to attack the situation pragmatically, to take each problem as it came and deal with it.

She laid her knapsack close by his and tried to make herself comfortable on the hard, gritty floor. For a moment of total irrationality she longed simply to be back in her own air-inflated bed, where she could remove her clothes and be cool and comfortable. Yet, as she drifted off to sleep, she did so with a drowsy confidence—confidence in this unstoppable man who lay so close to her in the warm darkness, in whose strength she was coming to believe, and whom she trusted, now, to lead them somehow to success.

She awoke with an aching head and a fuzzy tongue, to a sensation of confining darkness. It was pitch-black, and her limbs protested the position in which she'd lain. Her body felt sweaty and soiled, and the darkness seemed thick with heat.

"Elron?"

There was no answer.

She reached over toward the spot where he'd been lying.

Her fingers encountered only dust.

"Elron?" Her voice was sharper now, her throat tight with rising fear.

Her hand found his knapsack.

She calmed herself and tried to cast about with her mind. There was no trace of him within the room.

She sat stiffly upright on the floor and tried to think.

Where could he be? What had happened?

The air seemed to press in upon her. Her skin itched with the heat and the sweat of her sleep. Gingerly, her head still swimming, she climbed to her feet. It was difficult to maintain her balance. She knew she was swaying, and yet she could barely feel it. Her eyes told her nothing.

The counter—the light—which way had it been? She felt confused, turned around. Her lips were parched; she

needed a drink of water. Where was it? Where was the water? The light: she needed the light. Where? Over here?

A sharp pain in her shin told her she had reached the counter. With fumbling hands she groped for the light. *Where was it?*

Panic rose in her gorge. *The light was gone, and she was all alone in the darkness.*

Her temples throbbed. She wanted water.

She was sweating, now, sweating profusely. Her face itched with it. Her clothing clung to her. Her breath was coming in short, quick gasps. The air was so close, so hot!

Suddenly the door opened, and a gleam of light jabbed into the room.

"Elron?"

"Yes, milady," came his calm voice.

"Where have you been?"

"Exploring." His thoughts were steady, rocklike—calm and competent. She held on to them without his awareness, using his placid strength to soothe herself, as though she were clutching his arm around her.

"Exploring?"

He set the light down on the floor so that it pointed at the ceiling and lit the room with a soft glow. He began tugging open his knapsack.

"I wanted to see just how far these corridors go. This is the bottom floor, and I recalled that in Zominor the lowest floor was connected to a sort of underground maze.

"I was up to where I could look out. It's dusk—still very hot. The sand burned my hand when I touched it. I thought, if we could go *under* the sand . . . You know?"

He pulled out a canister of water, poured a little into a cup, and sipped it. "Have you had any?"

She came to kneel beside him. "No. I could drink it all, though."

"Don't." He poured less than an inch into the bottom of the cup. "Take a mouthful. Don't swallow it right away. Get your mouth wet with it first. It helps." He handed her the cup. "We'll eat now," he added.

As they ate their precooked and carefully portioned rations, he told her about what he'd found.

"There's a branching tunnel down the way," he said. "I followed it straight, so that I wouldn't lose my way. It connects every so often with corridors like ours. I guess each is a separate building. There are pipes and things along the walls."

"The central utilities," Shannara said.

"Yes. Well, the tunnel seemed to slope downward as I followed it, and it got a little cooler, too. But pretty soon I smelled water. Damp—fetid. You know?"

She had the picture from his mind. She nodded.

"Pretty soon there was water on the floor pools, standing there. There were marks on the walls, where it had been higher. I followed along for a way, skirting the pools, but up ahead I could see it got deeper, and the marks went higher."

"The sea. You must've been heading for the sea."

"Yes, and the part of the city that is underwater. But I don't understand why the level had dropped."

"The tide," Shannara said. "The tide rises and falls." She explained it to him.

"At any rate, I could see that way was useless. And the light"—he pointed at the handflash—"it seemed less bright, and that worried me. So I returned."

Shannara looked at the beam more critically. "You're right," she said. "It's getting dimmer."

"What does that mean? Will it go out?"

"It uses energy cells, like our handguns. It will need a new cell soon; that's all."

"Have we many?"

"Enough. If necessary we can take them from our guns."

"We cannot stay here," he told her. "We have little food, little water. The water I found—I tasted it, and it is unfit."

"Salt water," Shannara interjected.

"Yes, salty. Anyway, we cannot remain here. During the daytime it is too hot up above, so we must travel at night.

I do not know if even this is possible, but we must try. But—and this is what I do not know—which way? Where are we, and how must we travel to escape this wretched place?"

She sketched a crude map for him in the dust. "Here we are—Vagar. And here is the sea. Now, to the west there are mountains: so. And also to the east. North, there is desert, for I know not how far.

"Far north of us, and west, is the City Tanakor, which you tell me is only ruins now, and somewhere near it, eastward, your City Qar.

"So, normally, we should go north. For it will be cooler to the north, and north is our destination. But to the direct north of us is a great plains area, and it must be desert now for many hundreds of miles. We could never cross it."

"To the west, then," Elron said.

"Yes. The western mountains are closest. We may even be able to see them from here; I don't know. They should be cooler; there may be water there. It seems the best direction. We can follow them north."

"Should we not go around them, to the south?" Elron pointed at the map.

"It means a greater journey, through a country that was arid and unlived-in even in my own time. We would be wiser to seek passage through the mountains."

But Elron seized upon a phrase she had uttered. "Even in your *own* time?" he asked. "How do you mean that?"

He had not known; no one had told him of how she had inadvertently stepped across time.

Speaking quietly, taking similes and metaphors from his own mind to communicate the concept to him, she told him about the way the portals worked, and how they had malfunctioned and thrust her three thousand years into her own future.

"Then—you were not a sorceress in your own time?"

"No, only a technician. I was only Shannara, a silly young girl."

She could see that the thought troubled him.

"Do not be misled," she told him. "To the people of this

time I am a sorceress indeed. For I had a mind-gift, the ability to sense the thoughts and emotions of others, and this apparently no longer exists among the people of this world."

"You can see into my mind?" Elron asked.

"You knew it when you first met me."

His face reddened. "I had forgotten."

"Elron," she said, reaching out and touching his hand with her own, "you have nothing to fear from me. I would never have come with you if I had not been able to know your true thoughts."

They followed the complicated system of service tunnels west, under the city. It was not easy to know their direction, and Shannara had used a pocket-slate and a stylus, keeping track of their turns to left and right—fortunately, the tunnels were straight, and the turns right-angled—so that they always followed a westward course under the buried buildings and streets.

It was not an easy way. Some of the corridors were choked with sand, while others ended in natural dead-ends. Often, they were forced to retrace their steps, to try a cross-corridor to the right or left, and then the next east-west tunnel. Shannara calculated that fully two-thirds of the distance they traveled was spent in discovering unusable ways and backtracking again.

The light had grown dimmer, but Shannara insisted upon extracting all the power possible from its cell before discarding it. She kept a spare in her belt-pouch, ready for use when demanded. Yet when that time came, the momentary blackness all but defeated her, as suddenly familiar shapes and surfaces became alien and impossible to cope with.

"Elron," she said, fighting to keep panic from her voice. "I need you."

"How, milady?"

"Step behind me." She paused until he had. "Now, put your hands on my shoulders. Hold me, Elron. Just hold me."

He felt the trembling of her body when he touched her,

and the fabric across the shoulders seemed thin as vapor as he gripped her delicately molded shoulders in his large hands. He wondered at her strange request, but it made more sense to him now than it would have earlier. He knew, now, that she was not a supernatural being, but only a woman, a young woman at that, far from her own time and place. And so he held her reassuringly, his thoughts calm and understanding, sensing her need if not fully certain of his ability to meet it.

She grew more steady beneath his hands, and he could feel her arms moving, her shoulder muscles flexing against his fingers. And then, quite suddenly, the light was on, bright and almost dazzling to his unadjusted eyes, and he could look down at this slight, feminine figure he was holding, and his thoughts were full of surmise and wonder.

Chapter Seven

THERE CAME a time when they could find no further passageway leading west. Then they ascended the building in which they found themselves until they could stare through an open window at the sand-swept landscape before them.

Overhead, stars still shone like brilliant jewels in the black velvet of the sky. Elron had never seen them so bright, so sharp. He recognized constellations he knew, but they were tilted and lay close to the northern horizon.

The sand was like a sea, shaped in swells and wavelike ridges, glistening palely in the starlight. Neither moon was in sight. Far to the west, Elron thought he saw a darker line that might have been mountains, but he could not be sure.

The air was dry and clear, but even at this late-night hour, it shimmered with the heat of the sand—the stars near the horizon seemed to flicker.

Shannara pressed close beside him as they stared silently from the window. Her body seemed to tremble again, and then she asked, "How can we possibly cross that—all that?"

"We will cross it," Elron said quietly. "We have to."

Then he led the way below again, to a place where they might sleep out the searing day.

When she again awoke, the light was on, and when she sat up, she saw that Elron was examining something he had taken from an open cupboard. Her lips were cracked, and they stung when she licked them. She poured herself a meager sip of water and let her mouth absorb it without swallowing. It was something Elron had taught her, saying, "We have only two canisters of water. Normally we would drink them in a day. Now they must suffice for many days." She could not be selfish with it; their lives depended upon the water, as on nothing else.

The thick taste of sleep washed from her mouth, she went over to Elron and the handflash, asking, "What have you found?"

He held it up, showing her. It was a heavy piece of fabric, amazingly whole. Its folds caught the light of the handflash shimmeringly, a bright gleaming silver.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "Woven tiratle!"

"It feels heavier than it looks," he said. "But it is so shiny—unlike any cloth I have ever seen."

"It isn't cloth, although it is woven like cloth. Tiratle is a metal—a bright alloy that never tarnishes, never rusts. Beautiful, is it not? It was very rare—very valuable. I wonder who hid it away in a room like this?" The room had the appearance of a storeroom.

"I wouldn't know," Elron replied, "but I shall be very grateful to him for his foresight and thoughtfulness."

"Why—what do you mean? It—oh, I see," she said, glimpsing the thought in his mind.

He spoke it aloud anyway. "We shall need daytime

cover once we are out in that desert. I had thought of using our clothes, but this will do far better. See?" He held it up again. "It is larger than a blanket. And see those?" he pointed to four thin straight rods, of a coppery metal. "I took these also from the closet. They will be of great help."

Shannara peered into the closet. The rods had apparently been used horizontally, to hang things from. They were each about four feet long.

While she got out their canned and dried rations, Elron made a neat bundle of the metal cloth and the rods and thrust the bundle through the shoulder straps of his knapsack.

Shannara was glad when they had left the room. It had been small, and she was acutely conscious that her body smelled, contributing to the closeness of the air in the room. Elron too carried now an animal-like odor, and his leathers were soaked with stale sweat. He had removed the chain-mail vest, but he still wore his tunic and britches. His bronzed arms were thickly muscled, and she had enjoyed watching their play as with her help he had shouldered the knapsack and its attached bundle.

It was early evening, and the sky to the west was still afire with the dying glow of the day's sun. The thick window sill was still uncomfortably hot to the touch, and heat hit Elron's face with palpable force when he leaned out over the sand.

The window was only a few feet from the surface of the sand, and its frame, of the same black obsidian as the building face, paint long scoured clean, was notched and grooved in horizontal lines. The floor of the room was brushed with sand, while the room's corners were heaped with it.

"It will be hot, and without relief," Elron said.

"Do we have a choice?" she asked with a smile.

"No. It will get cooler later, but we need as much time as we can get."

So saying, he swung his legs over the low sill and dropped down to the sand below.

The sand was not firmly packed. He sank in to his ankles. Immediately, the heat penetrated his leather boots, burning at the tops of his feet and his ankles. He kicked at the sand and then bent down to touch it with his hand.

He looked up to see Shannara sitting on the sill, her long legs swinging freely. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"The sand," he said. "Its surface is very hot, but only inches down it is much cooler."

"A shame we cannot walk only on that which is beneath the surface," she said. Then she dropped beside him. "Oh! I see—I feel—what you mean!"

The going was slow. The sand tugged at their feet, and slogging through it soon tired them, bringing sweat coursing down their faces and backs.

Once, near midnight, as the Red Moon sat mockingly over them, they paused to eat a little and wet their parched lips. Suddenly Shannara exclaimed in surprise, "Your back! It is covered with white stains!" She touched her finger to the cracking leather, then tasted it. "Salt!" The salt from his quickly drying perspiration was permeating his leather tunic. The girl's jumpsuit, too, was salt-encrusted.

"This is not good," she said. "Our clothes will soon rot unless they can be washed."

He laughed, a weary sound without substance, and said nothing. She felt his tiredness, the physical fatigue he endured. Yet he made no complaint when he again shouldered his heavy knapsack and its bundle of tiratle and rods, and she felt she could do no less than carry her own, smaller load bravely.

The smaller moon was still a tiny disk high above the western horizon when Shannara sank to her knees and said, "No more, Elron. No further. I have had enough." Her face was drawn and lined with dust and fatigue. She had insisted upon stopping at frequent intervals for the past several hours, and he had made no objection. Now he simply nodded.

"Rest. I will wake you."

She curled in the sand, her knapsack again her pillow, and fell immediately asleep.

Elron looked down at her, studying her, trying to fathom her. His own legs, his calves and thighs and even his ankles, ached from the unaccustomed strain of plowing through the thick sand. How had she, a much smaller, more fragile creature, stood the pace for so long? She had not even asked another sip of water—he had refused it last time, but he would have given her a little this time—before collapsing into sleep. The strain was telling on her; that he could tell. Her face was thinner, and her eyes were shadowed. With so little water to drink, and sweating as she was, her tissues were giving up their own water. She would lose many pounds before this trek was completed. And so, he reminded himself, would he. . . .

Still, she was a beautiful woman. Her beauty, so soft and artificial on the surface, like that of some tenderly cultivated flower, revealed its interior strength now. The richly improbable creature he had met as the Sorceress was giving way now to that of Shannara, Woman: a woman who would follow her man through the very pits and fires of hell without sacrificing her strength and determination. She was a woman very much worth the knowing, infinitely valuable in possession. He hoped he could bring her safely out of this ordeal, her strength intact. The Others in Qar were forgotten for now. He had an immediate challenge to face, a new primary responsibility.

A momentary stirring in the air touched his cheek briefly, a caress that startled him from his reverie. Turning to face the direction from which it came, he climbed the nearest dune.

Dunes spread out from him in every direction. None were large or high—the difference between their peaks and hollows was probably not more than ten feet. He had been following the stars westward, sticking to the hollows between dunes wherever possible, to avoid the more tiring climbing and descent. Now, as he looked to the east, he was immediately disheartened to see how close the towers of Vagar still were.

For all the weary plodding they had done, they were

only a few miles from the dead city. Elron sighed, then returned to the hollow, and to Shannara.

"Wake, child," he said softly, bending over her. Her face seemed relaxed, softer now than it had earlier, and much younger. He had called her "child" without thinking; yet the sight of her seemed to draw out the paternal, the protective in him.

"Wake now," he said again. She made no sound, and he took her shoulder and shook it gently.

"Uhmmmm," she murmured. "Nummmmmm." She moved her head back and forth, twice.

"It is time to wake up; we have yet to travel tonight," Elron said, feeling a little helpless.

"Nup," she said. "Lemme sleep." She curled into a tighter ball.

"Shannara!" he said sternly. "You must wake up!"

She opened an eye and peered up at him. "Is it night again?" she asked, her voice thick.

"It is still night," he replied. "We have several hours yet till dawn. We have come such a short way, Shannara! We must not sacrifice our night time in this way!"

Stumbling in the sand, she got to her feet. He gave her a little water; more than he'd intended. She seemed cross with him, but still addled by the sleep she had not entirely shaken from her. Docilely, she took up her knapsack and followed him, her feet making smaller, closer depressions in the sand over his.

They marched across the rolling sands till dawn, and even into daylight. Elron had become reduced in himself to a marching automaton, mindlessly trudging westward with machinelike strides, sometimes closing his eyes in weariness for long moments until his foot stumbled, then opening them again to be sure that his path was directly west.

Shannara stumbled along beside him, sometimes falling behind, then hurrying to resume her pace. She was no more fully conscious than he, but she drew her own stamina in part from his rugged determination. It was a trick she had learned long ago, when her parents were

alive: when a day had grown too long for her to remain awake, she could borrow a kind of wakefulness from her mother or her father, and continue on awhile with the borrowed strength.

She entered into his waking dreams, seeing without assessing them the stray thoughts that flew idly through his mind, recognizing occasionally images of herself, but without understanding their significance.

Then, when he was in a more wakeful moment, Elron became aware of his shadow, stretching long ahead of him on the dappled sands, and of an early heat upon the back of his head and neck. He glanced up.

The sky was lightening, the stars were already gone, and the bright wink of the morning moon hovered just above the dark horizon.

Dawn had come; the sun had risen.

He stopped, and Shannara walked a half dozen steps beyond him before she too stopped.

He slung off his back the knapsack and its added bundle. From the knapsack he took a pan, a cooking dish that had been packed in anticipation of wild game. With the pan he began digging in the sand, squatting over it, kicking the sand up between his legs and behind him, like a dog.

"What are you doing?" Shannara asked dully.

"I am digging a hole," he replied with profundity. Shannara began laughing, her laughter thin with tired hysteria, and he found himself joining her, the laughter shaking his thick body until suddenly he was too weak to dig any more.

He had scooped a shallow depression just big enough for their bodies to lie side by side.

Now he planted the rods, one at each of the four corners of the hole, pushing each in to a depth of two feet, leaving only half their length above the sand.

Then he took the blanket of tiratle, gleaming in the early white sunlight, and threw it open so that it flapped outward over the sand and then over the rods.

It was close-woven and heavy, but that suited his pur-

pose. It caught and hooked itself over the upthrust rods, sagging in the center but forming a tent over the depression in the sand. It was quite large—large enough to cover a hole perhaps twice as wide—and he scooped sand over its trailing edges, weighting them in place to hold the metal cloth taut.

Then he gestured to Shannara. "Will you give me the pleasure of joining me?" he asked, with a courtly bow that nearly caused him to tumble headlong into the sand.

She laughed again and flopped down on the sand on her stomach to crawl under the enclosure.

He followed her, and they stretched out side by side, the canopy hanging only a foot above their faces. The sand was as hard as the floors of the buildings they'd slept in, but one could squirm in the sand and fit it to the bumps and hollows of one's body. It felt quite deliciously comfortable to Elron, and he felt sleep wash over him in a great, comforting black wave.

He awoke to suffocating heat. When he twisted his head he felt the sand flake away from where it had crusted and dried on the back of his neck. His face felt dry and stretched too tightly. The air in the makeshift tent was blistering hot and absolutely still. It almost hurt to draw a breath of it into his lungs, and his mouth and nose were painfully dry.

As he stared up at the canopy of tiratle, it seemed to glow. He weakly lifted his arm and brushed against the metallic cloth with the back of one knuckle. It seared against his skin.

He was light-headed and very weak. He knew that he'd been sweating in his sleep and that he and Shannara were both becoming dehydrated. He fumbled with his knapsack and pulled from it a water canister. It held only a few hot drops, and he drained them, savoring their touch on his cracking lips and fibrous tongue. Then he took a piece of dried fruit and sucked on it without chewing it.

He tried to make an inventory. Less than one canister of water left. Enough at this rate for no more than a day, for they badly needed water now; their reserves were

sweated away. Enough food for perhaps two, maybe three days, if conserved. But a balance must needs be struck between the minimum of food they needed to survive and the amount that would supply them the necessary energy to escape this oven of hell.

They were not going to make it.

It was the first time he had allowed himself to admit it. The desert stretched ahead yet for many days' travel. And they hadn't the water.

Without water, a man is lost in the desert. For the dry air sucks it from his pores, from the very tissues of his body. Without water a man becomes dehydrated, his blood thickens, and he dies. He can die even with undigested food in his stomach.

The heat made Elron's thoughts feverish, and his fear that Shannara might somehow pick up his fears only added impetus to them.

But somehow he managed to close his hot, dry eyes and then whirl into a tormented sleep.

When Shannara awoke, it was dusk again, and she found her hand entwined with Elron's. She wondered who had joined them: she or he? But for the moment it was comforting to let her hand remain in Elron's strong grasp. He was sleeping and his conscious mind was somnolent, but he seemed uneasy, and his hand twitched, once convulsively tightening its grip on hers.

They lay without speaking until the sun had finally set, before they gingerly crawled from their cover. The material was still quite hot to the touch. Elron used the pan to scoop hot sand from an open area so that they might sit. They made a thin meal of the food and some of their water. Then Elron spoke.

"Milady," he said, reverting to his older, more formal address, "I must broach an indelicate subject."

His embarrassment was such that she did not probe his mind but waited for him to voice his thoughts. "Yes?" she asked.

"We, umm . . . we have used up one of our two canis-

ters of water. The other cannot last beyond sundown tomorrow. When that happens, we shall be without water. And without water we cannot survive."

"I see." But she also saw that he was only skirting his real subject.

"We lose the water we drink in two ways," he said, awkwardly. "The first way is by, ah, perspiration. And this we cannot salvage. It is sucked up by the air and is gone." He paused.

She came to his rescue. "The other way, then? You want to salvage that?"

"I can think of nothing else."

She thought for a moment. "It is not a bad idea. I think I know of a way by which we might distill it—purify it. But this is a process of diminishing returns. We cannot salvage more than half of what we drink. Soon there will be none."

"Soon there will be none anyway," he said, nodding somberly. "In this way we only prolong our time a little and put off the inevitable. Yet I will not willingly accept defeat. As long as one way to remain alive exists, I will take it."

She smiled, her lips cracking painfully. "And so will I, Elron."

A faint breeze stirred across the dunes that night, drawing with it a sifting of sand that obliterated their footprints soon after their passage. It was a southern breeze, and it brought with it the faint smell of the sea, and a hint of coolness. It uplifted their spirits and helped them in their tedious journey so well that, when Elron climbed another dune, he reported that Vagar's high towers were now quite distant; they had come a goodly way.

But ahead of them the dark line that might mark mountains on the horizon was no closer, and the dunes seemed higher, their slopes steeper.

They trudged now in silence, speech being too great an effort.

They stopped periodically to take a piece of food to

chew or just to hold in their mouths, the saliva it brought being as valuable as a drink of water. Both were haggard, and both showed it. Elron's eyes were rimmed with dark rings, his cheeks were gaunt, his beard was matted and unkempt. Shannara's face was drawn, her look haunted. Her long, beautiful hair was dull and brittle, despite the care she still gave it. Both felt their clothes to be a prison, stained and chafing against their skin. Neither would speak of it.

When dawn was imminent, Elron found a valley between two high dunes, one directly to the east, the other to the west. They would provide some shade during the morning and evening hours, and a faint stirring of wind sometimes poked its way between them. Once more Elron dug them a hole and suspended the blanket of tiratle over it.

Then he took the empty canister and disappeared behind a dune with it. When he returned and handed it to Shannara, it was not empty.

After adding her own portion, Shannara rummaged in the knapsacks and found the transparent bag in which some of the dried fruit had been contained. She emptied it and then fixed it over the mouth of the open canister. The bag flopped over to one side, and after setting the canister firmly upright, its base buried in the sand, she left it so.

Then once more they slipped under their cover and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter Eight

NEITHER ELRON NOR SHANNARA slept well that day. Elron had fixed the canopy so that its sides would be open, hoping that faint breezes might slip under it and make the confined air less ovenlike. And this did happen. But with a penalty: when Elron awoke at one point from fevered nightmares, he found a thin covering of sand drifted over him. It had worked its way into his leather, where it abraded painfully. He did his best to brush it off, shaking himself only a little, for fear of waking Shannara. But the more he squirmed, the less comfortable he grew, and it was only pure fatigue that washed sleep over him once more. And it was to be a fitful sleep, punctuated by restless tossings, and once by a moan, which brought Shannara straight awake, wondering what she had heard, to fall back again into her own heat-dazed slumber when the sound was not repeated.

That evening, as Shannara was inspecting her homemade distillery and Elron was rolling up the tiratle, Elron said, "Even if by some miracle we survive this journey, I fear our clothes will not. My leathers are stiff and badly cracked—the sand and dry air are taking their natural oils. They badly need washing and reworking. And your clothes, milady—already they show holes and tears."

"Yes." She nodded. "The salt from my body is rotting the fibers. If we had water enough to wash . . ." She gave a weak laugh.

"Speaking of water . . ." he said, approaching her.

"It appears successful," she said, showing him.

The transparent bag was now half-full of a colorless liquid. "The heat led to evaporation," she explained. "The water condensed on the bag, and most of it ran down its sides to collect here. Some, of course, dripped back into the canister." She unfastened the bag. A sickly-

sweet odor rose from the canister. "Sugars," she explained. "Sugars and acids. The acids are poisonous." There was still a fair quantity of liquid in the canister.

"And this?" Elron said, indicating the bag, whose neck she now tied. "It is drinkable?"

"It will not taste good, perhaps, but we can hope it will be free of poisons."

He regarded the meager quantity of liquid. There was no more than a pint. "It will have to do, I guess," he said.

They traveled a good distance, the first half of the night. When the Red Moon was overhead, its light almost as bright as that of the sun in more temperate latitudes, they could see an actual sawtooth pattern to the thin line of mountains on the horizon.

But Elron was worried. He paused occasionally to sniff the dry air, and sometimes to stare up at the moon and the stars.

"The wind," he said. "Have you noticed the wind?"

Shannara nodded, not faltering in the plodding rhythm of her stride. "Yes, it feels so fresh, so cool. I feel the hint of water on it. Oh, Elron! Do you suppose it will rain?"

Elron shook his head. "There are no clouds. The water is the scent of the sea. But look to the south, low on the horizon."

The dunes were lower here, and less frequent, occasional patches of the ground bare clay. Shannara directed her eyes southward.

They had come just beyond the sharp finger of sea that probed northward to Vagar; the land extended to the south some thousands of miles.

"I—I see nothing."

"Look again. Do you see stars?"

"Why . . . no. There is a haze or . . . what?"

"A storm. But not a rainstorm. The wind is picking up the sand."

"What will that mean?"

"I am not sure. But I have been observing the shapes of the dunes, of the ridges and the markings on them. A wind seems to blow northward here, to swoop around—

perhaps a great funnel caused by the mountains you showed me—and then to sweep southward upon the city. And observe here, how in places the ground seems swept clear."

"Yes. For the first time in days, I feel I can walk easily!"

"Well, perhaps the sand will simply blow over and past us. That would be better than if were to be buried under a dune. But—those marks upon the buildings, Shannara! It cut them! If the wind raises, we will be in danger; of that much I am certain."

He tried to steer a course through the bare stretches, but still they often had to climb drifts of sand. And even where the ground was hard, it was a sandy clay, bare, with no sign of animal or vegetable life.

And still the wind blew. Occasionally it would lift a filmy layer of sand an inch from the surface, to move it like a stream of water. These streams of sand were deceptive, since they could be mistaken in the eerie light for solid footing. And they were abrasive as well, cutting against the leather of Elron's boots and fraying the legs of Shannara's jumpsuit.

Now the way became more difficult, and Shannara stumbled more often against Elron. The air seemed less clean, and Elron felt as though his mouth was caked with dust. The wind was rising—slowly, but inexorably. As the Red Moon settled in the west, its face was an unholy hue of scarlet that they had never seen before.

Gusts of wind sent sand stinging against their faces by the time Elron called a halt.

"We cannot go on. We must fix ourselves a shelter."

Shannara looked to the south. The whole southern portion of the sky seemed muted, the stars dimmed and disappearing completely near the horizon. It was as though an invisible curtain hung over part of the sky.

The area where they had stopped was of rolling sand. Elron tried to dig a little away, but fresh sand blew immediately into each hole he dug. Finally he threw the tiratle mantle over the ground and let the drifting sand anchor it before he squirmed under it to affix the rods that would transform it into their tent of sorts.

Shannara crawled under cover with him, and the two lay together, unspeaking but tensely awake, listening to the whistle of the wind and the scurrying rustle of the sand.

The weave of the metal fibers was not tight enough to keep out all the sand. Soon a thin dusting of powder covered them both, and Shannara was coughing.

"The water, Elron—please?"

He passed the canister with what little was left of their original water to her, and watched while she sipped almost greedily at the life-giving fluid.

"The air," she said, passing the canister back to him. "It's getting thicker—dustier."

He choked, then coughed. The air outside was filling with dust and sand, and even under the tiratle cover, dust sifted onto them and filled their captive air.

"We need masks—something to cover our faces," he said.

"Cloth?"

He nodded, his face a gray blur in the dim light.

There was a ripping sound, and then more ripping. In another moment, she handed him a dark square of cloth. He pressed it to his face and caught the scent of her body in it.

"Your clothing?"

"We had nothing else. It was soon to tear loose anyway. If we moisten them . . . ?"

They used some of the reclaimed water. It had a brackish odor, but it sufficed. They lay against each other, their faces close in the hollow between their bodies, their masks pressed over their noses and mouths. The air seemed dry and alive with electricity. It was very dark, and the high whine of the wind was now a steady shriek. The blanket over them would now and then sag with sand, flap, and be free again, until more sand drifted over it. Once, when the sand did not blow off but piled higher on the sagging cover, Elron kicked his foot against it, and for a moment he thought they would lose the protective sheet as it shuddered, bellied up into the air, and then fell again over the supporting rods.

The shrill whine of sand and wind became monotonous

after a while, and then, without realizing it, both fell off into a huddled slumber.

Elron awoke to a sensation that at first he could not place. He was cold.

He shivered and drew his knees up to his body. Then his mind grew slowly more awake.

He was cold; could this be?

He shifted, and dislodged a several-inch-thick covering of sand that had settled on him. He shook his head and lifted up to look about himself.

Inches away was the white mound of Shannara's sand-covered body. Her face was under the crook of her arm, the dry mask of cloth still covering it.

A twilight light filtered in under the flap on the windward side of the tiratle cover. There was no longer any sound of wind.

Careful not to disturb the still-sleeping Shannara, he slipped free and stood in wonder in a weirdly changed world.

The sun stood high overhead, its normal white blaze muted to a deep and bloody red, its light thinner than the Red Moon's when in its full phase.

The sky itself was murky, almost as if filled with smoke. In places it seemed to flicker, as if echoing far-off flashes of light. The wind was still; the muted world silent.

He tried to find the mountains to the west, but there was no sign of them; no sign, indeed, of any landmark. He could see only a quarter of a mile or less, and then it was as if a sudden curtain dropped. The sands of the dunes and plains blended imperceptibly with the dust-thick air, and there was no horizon.

He swung his arms to gain circulation, and was astounded to see his breath cloud momentarily before him in the air. It was positively cold—the temperature was nearly one hundred degrees below normal for this time of day.

He took advantage of his privacy to remove his leathers: his tunic, breechclout, leggings, and boots. Sand was

everywhere in them; it coated his very skin. But in some respects it was a blessing. He remembered the forest beasts he had seen wallowing in dust-pits. It was a way to bathe. He sat in the sand and found that it had a finer, more powdery consistency. The reason, he discovered, was that this was dust still drifting out of the air itself. He rolled in it, scrubbing himself. It would leave his skin feeling dry and leathery, but it would also leave him cleaner than he had been in many days; it was worth the slight discomfort to be free for at least a time of the itching, dry leather. The brisk scrubbing kept him warm, as well, although he was used to cold-water baths during cold weather. Winter in Qar often saw blizzards.

He was wearing his breechclout again, and pounding his leather into some substitute for suppleness, when Shannara climbed out.

She beat her hands together and then hugged herself. Then she forgot her shivers to glance around her, wide-eyed.

Elron found his eyes drawn in turn to her uncovered bodice. Where before her green jumpsuit had closed demurely at her neck, it now descended from her shoulders to just above her breasts, the neckline cutting directly, squarely across the top of her breasts, where, when she stooped, he could see the filmy white fabric of her undergarment.

In the confusion of the moment, he forgot his own near nakedness, and when he remembered, for some reason it did not disturb him as it might have. He was with a lady of high station, and he had long ago learned the propriety of one's dealing with "decent" women—as opposed to those of easy virtue so freely accessible in certain sections of Qar that he had sometimes frequented. Yet despite his training, he could no longer think of Shannara as simply "milady," the Sorceress of Zominor. They had shared too much. Now, here in this place, they were facing eventual and probable death—facing it with a stoic bravery that could not disguise death's early inroads upon them. Elron's skin was dry, thick, and leathery, and it hung loosely upon his bones. His eyes seemed to be sunken

into two great hollows in his skull, and only his beard disguised his gaunt cheeks.

Shannara, in turn, had a pale yellowish complexion, and her cheekbones seemed pressed tightly against the skin of her face. Her lips had thinned and were bloody crusts against her teeth. Now, with her jumpsuit torn open, her thin shoulder blades and collarbone stood out skeletally through her skin.

She was staring at him, and her voice was a husky croak when she asked, "Am I ill and feverish, or is it very cold?"

"It is indeed cold." Elron nodded.

"Then how can you stand there so naked?"

He chuckled, his voice grim. "I haven't the energy to shiver." He picked up one of his garments and shook it free of sand.

"You cleaned your clothes?"

"A little."

"It seems a good idea." Then, before his quite startled eyes, she turned her back, reached behind her, and worked a catch. An invisible seam parted down the jumpsuit's back, and it split to her waist. She leaned forward and shook the suit free of her arms and shoulders. It fell to her waist, and then down her thighs.

She was wearing only scanty underthings—a white halter and white briefs, neither any longer white.

A breeze stirred, and it brought with it a welcome touch of warmth. She hugged herself, then bent to scoop some sand onto her arms.

In her own matter-of-factness, she cloaked herself with the modesty of dignity, but as Elron donned his own clothes, he could not help staring at her.

There was no denying the voluptuousness of her body, and in other, happier climes, he might have admitted to having seen no finer. But this was a body badly treated. Her ribs and backbone stood out, her skin curving into the concavities between them. Her hips still swelled from a narrow waist, but her haunches were lean, her legs thin. She had lost much weight.

How much longer could they survive? he wondered.

They had so little water left—never enough to survive to the mountains, even if this queer cold remained. And if the warmer gusts that were starting up now meant anything, they would be sweltering again all too soon.

Shannara climbed back into her jumpsuit once more, and they repacked their things and shouldered their knapsacks. Elron wanted to cover as much distance as he could while the weather remained cool.

Shannara flashed him long, oblique looks from under her lashes as they trudged through the twilight gloom, the sun hanging above them, a bleeding wound in the sky. He wondered what she might be thinking. He wished he had her strange gift of knowing men's thoughts—and that he might cloak his own thoughts as modestly as he could his aching body.

The sun hung low on the horizon, fat and bloated, staring at them like an evil eye, when suddenly the wind rose from random gusts to a high howl.

It caught them unawares. The first furnacelike blast knocked Shannara to her knees, and she cried out. Sand lashed them as Elron pulled her to her feet, and they stood with their backs to the wind, legs braced.

This time the wind was from the northeast, and it seemed to throw them forward, blowing sheets of sand before them, filling the air almost solidly with its thick dust.

With the wind returned the suffocating heat of the desert. The dry, searing heat swept over them like tongues of flame.

"Elron—we must get under cover!" The wind all but tore the words from her mouth.

Elron slung the knapsack from his shoulders, bracing it with his feet as sand quickly piled against it. He tugged at the blanket of tiratle, and suddenly a corner whipped loose, snapping at his hand like a thing alive.

Then the entire sheet was in the air, billowing, twisting, climbing up over them—and then suddenly free!

"Elron!" Shannara screamed.

Elron wasted no breath on the curses that filled his

blackening mind, but ran after it. But as though plucked from the very air, the blanket was gone, disappeared into the gathering murk of sand and night: *gone.*

He fought his way back to her, his arms shielding his face from the driving sand. He said nothing; he knew that she knew. And she opened her arms and pulled him into an embrace, locking her arms around him and holding him, trying to tell him wordlessly of her knowledge, her sympathy, her understanding. They were together.

They would die together.

Still locked in each other's arms, they fell to their knees, huddled over their two knapsacks, and waited for everything to end.

Time passes. Once more the winds fell. And somewhere to the east, dawn glimmered.

A drop of water fell on the back of Elron's neck, pocking the sand that covered it with a little crater. Another fell, this one into his sand-thick hair. Neither brought him from his dazed stupor.

Then the air not more than twenty yards from the huddled sand-covered mound formed by their two bodies was galvanized with a great bolt of electricity—a lightning bolt that smote the earth and made the ground leap and tremble with its blast.

Almost immediately after, another lightning bolt crashed only a little farther off, and the black sky was etched with the glare as the sound struck again at Elron and Shannara.

Elron recovered his wits first and threw himself atop Shannara as she started for her feet. He tried to shout a warning at her, but his ears rang, and he could not tell if he had actually made a noise. Indeed, it could hardly matter, since Shannara could hear no better. But he pulled her down and kept her down, while lightning struck the crests of the low dunes that lay all about them, and the air was so charged with electricity that his hair stood out from his head, and Shannara's became a tangled fright wig.

The stench of ozone was thick in his nostrils, and he

kept his eyes clenched shut against the furious glare of the lightning. He was half-lying upon Shannara, his arms over her, his head buried in her neck. He knew that she had turned her head away from the sky and was clutching him—her hands tightened on him with every red flicker of light through his eyelids, and every resounding crash of thunder.

He had never in his life been so close to the impact of lightning. He had never before heard the thunder resound simultaneously with the flash of lightning. This was not a resonantly pealing thunder—it was an immediate explosion that crashed and buffeted against him, pounding his ears unmercifully.

Then came a stroke of lightning without its instantaneous accompaniment of thunder, and when the clap of thunder followed it, it seemed muffled and distant, and hardly penetrated the stabbing ringing of his ears.

And as the lightning receded, as suddenly as it had come upon them, the rains followed its wake.

Not a few scattered drops now, too dispersed to be noticed amid the jar of lightning, but a sudden torrent—a thick, hot rain that washed the sand from their hair and clothes in minutes, pelting down on the sand to raise dust puffs at first, before turning the sand to dense mud and settling it down upon itself.

They rose uncertainly to their feet and lifted their faces, mouths wide, to the drenching downpour. Shannara's mouth worked with soundless laughter as she ran her clean fingers through her hair, then stripped her soggy jumpsuit from her body.

Elron felt a great surge of happiness rising through him as he too reveled in the sweet joy of the wet rain. He unfastened his leathers with shaking fingers and delighted in the clean feel of the rain upon his parched bare skin.

He did not dance about as the almost hysterical Shannara did, however. Instead he methodically pulled the four rods from the knapsack, stood them in the sand, and then hung first his own clothes, then Shannara's upon them, that they might wash clean. Then he opened the

empty canister and set it in the sand so that it could gather water. He cleaned the second canister with sand and the remainder of their reclaimed water, and set it next to the first. Finally, he opened that bag that held the reclaimed water and hung it from one rim, open mouth up, from a rod.

Something touched his bare shoulder. He swung around in surprise.

It was Shannara. Her long hair was plastered to her head and shoulders, glistening. Her lips moved, and her eyes were dancing. Her brief undergarments, molded to her skin, had become almost transparent.

He pointed at his ears, but she only smiled and nodded. Then she shaped her lips again.

He tried to read the words from her lips, but he could not. He shook his head in bewilderment. The rain was a heavy curtain that distorted his vision.

She gave him an arch look, the meaning of which he could not mistake, then threw her wet arms around his neck and pulled his head down.

At first he thought only that she wanted to try to shout into his ear. He was wrong.

Her arms slid smoothly over his skin, her fingers kneading his neck. Her lips tasted wet and salty. He found himself responding eagerly, his arms embracing her slender body, pulling her up against his own, almost stepping upon her sandy foot with his as he shifted his weight.

Then her hands were against his chest and she was pushing back, as though he had made the wrong response, had interpreted her gesture mistakenly.

He stepped back, suddenly shocked by what he had been doing, aware of the lust that had overtaken him in that brief and powerful moment.

He opened his mouth to shape the words, but she put her finger to his lips and then touched her own forehead. Then she burst into amazing laughter, a laughter that seemed, in its soundless way, to join him to her rather than to mock him.

His ears still sang as he watched her turn her back to

him. Then, quite suddenly, the band of cloth across her back sagged and fell.

In the next moment they were facing each other, entirely free of clothing, understanding each other entirely. This time he felt no hesitation as he gathered her into his arms and then lowered her to the wet sands.

And still the rain fell, in heavy torrents.

Chapter Nine

STEAMING SANDS lay under her, while the masculine bulk of Elron was braced over her. Rain washed the sky, the air, his body, her face. She raised her loins in panting upward thrusts, rejoicing in his hard penetration, drawing his tough-muscled body against the length of hers, feeling the heat of his breath at the side of her neck, the fire in his mind.

The two of them seemed to be outside eternity, removed by an inseparable gulf from the reality of the desert and their grim plight. In a sense they were in a state of shock —the shock of too much, too fast, and the sudden release of the death-tension in the deluge of life-giving rain.

Call it a fertility rite: a celebration of life and a new, if momentary, lease upon this most precious of gifts. A celebration, a moment of joy outside pain and grim reality —a time when hunger and thirst, heat and body ache were part of another universe, put aside for this long moment of the dancing of spirits and love.

An explosion—and a fusing of identities, full of wonder. Elron's pure thrill, as he had touched her, felt her, caressed her, entered her—all *shared* so wonderously. He knew, now, that she rode the wave of his feelings in a

closed circle of feedback upon feedback that could only build and intensify—a growing moment of sublime bliss as he lost himself within the fusion of their two striving selves, and she surrendered herself to him.

This was something very new for Elron, and in a wondering part of his mind he felt as though he had been until now a virgin—that before he'd been only a physical participant in the rite of sex, only now discovering the emotional, the link of spirits as well as that of bodies.

Before, it had been a mechanical act, a relief for his body. Sex had been an outlet, a dumping ground for his accumulated lusts. It had been no more an act of giving than that of bodily excreting; less an act of accepting than of demanding. It was something every rutting young man did, and boasted of. Perhaps the boasts had covered others' feelings of emptiness, as it had his. But until this time, this hour, this moment, he could not have admitted it.

Now, in this wholly female creature, this lovely, loving Shannara, he had not only found a woman he desired, but he respected a woman he could admire as well as love.

And more: in this act of physical love, this coupling of bodies, this act of sex, he found love.

Without knowing it, he had been embarked upon a greater quest: a quest whose purpose had been shaped within him when he had lain apart from Max Quest and his woman and listened to the sounds of their love. And his quest had led him here, to its culmination, to his discovery and his joining with Shannara.

It was a thrill that curled through his body, responding both to his heightened erotic senses and to his emotional exultation, driving his thrust deeper into her willingness, and wresting from her throat deep animal sounds that rose steadily in pitch, building, giving, taking, rejoicing, approaching . . .

The landscape stood in stark-white relief for a bare instant, and then thunder rolled across the dunes.

The rain pelted down yet harder.

There was no sign of the sun that day, and the thick

gray clouds overhead did not betray even a lightened patch. The rain came down in steady torrents, as though a great sea were falling from the sky.

The sand was soaked, and rivulets flowed down the dunes, carving channels, coming together into little streams and thence into larger ones.

The air was thick with heat and humidity, the cloud cover shielding the direct rays of the sun but forming a great roof over the desert hothouse, slowly steaming the saturated sands.

A warm stream, at least body temperature, washed under their feet and eddied against their limbs. Shannara and Elron lay side by side, their bodies touching, heads turned, gazing into each other's eyes. Their legs were intertwined, their hands joined. The water slipped lightly, caressingly around their thighs and loins, bathing them with languorous sensuality.

They lay that way for a time neither could account, and while it lasted, Elron felt he could see into her mind as she into his, each tasting the other's presence in intimate discovery and loving awareness. They spoke no words; yet each *knew*.

The water carved the sand from under them, and soon they were half-lying in a pool. Once, Shannara laughed, and he knew the trickle of sand slipping from under her head had tickled her. He slid his large hand down her waist, over her hip and down her thigh, to retrace its route up her inner thigh.

And for a time, each was content just to have the other.

But the rain began to slacken.

He climbed to his feet and planted them once more in the harsh universe of reality. He turned to reach down for her, and saw her looking up at him, making no move to rise.

She smiled. "What a statue you are, Elron," she said softly. "How beautiful you are, standing against the sky. How tall, how beautiful. . . ."

He smiled down at her.

"Your legs—like pillars, corded with muscles, thick as

ropes. And, ah! Your torso, your heavy manhood—I love to stare at it; it makes me yearn for more, Elron. . . ."

He leaned down, took her hand, and pulled her grudgingly to her feet. "You'll have your opportunities, wench," he laughed. He smacked her on her sandy behind. "But just now we must see to ensuring them."

Their clothes hung, quite soaked, from the nearby rods. Both canisters were full of water, and the transparent bag had filled to where its neck dipped lowest.

Elron picked up his leathers and shook them. They were heavy and stiff. He donned his breechclout, washed his feet clean of sand, and pulled on his boots. The tunic and leggings he rolled into a bundle with the rods and fixed to his knapsack as he had done with the blanket of tiratle. He shrugged the knapsack over his bare shoulders and turned to regard Shannara, his expression softening.

She was wearing her brief undergarments again but had packed her jumpsuit in her knapsack, following Elron's lead. It seemed foolish for them to wear the bulky clothes now. . . . She smiled to herself with the thought that they should have done this days ago. . . .

Night fell, and with it came a darkness greater than any they had known on the desert. A light, mistlike drizzle still fell, but the rain was no longer significant. The clouds, however, still blocked the sky, and without starlight or moonlight, the way became much more difficult.

They had found their way crossed by deep chasms carved in the sand, some of them fifteen feet or more deep but usually narrow enough to jump over; or making a short detour, they would find a cave-in where the soft sand had fallen, blocking the cut and supplying a bridge across.

In other places they had waded pools whose bottoms were sometimes soft and shifting and altogether dangerous in Elron's estimation. Now darkness made the going far more hazardous. They used Shannara's handflash, but its darting beam cast weird shadows, glanced deceptively over real hollows.

"Elron?" She put her hand on his sweaty arm. "Elron, I'm tired."

"So am I." He did not slow. There was at least the advantage that the sand had been packed by the rain, and made firmer footing. He swept the light ahead.

"Elron—darling?"

He stopped and turned to face her, the handflash pointing to the ground. Shadows climbed her face in the reflected light.

"Shannara. Look into my mind. Tell me what you see there."

Her lower lip trembled. "You—you're tired. You want to stop. But . . . you know we must press on."

"Why?"

"Because the rain will stop soon, and tomorrow there will be a hot sun once more. We—we must make what distance we can. But, oh, Elron! You must not blame yourself for our lost time! Please!"

He smiled, a bitter smile. "It makes an irony, does it not? The very time we took to discover each other may be the time we needed to save our lives."

The light caught and accepted the thrust of her thighs, the inward curve of her sunken belly, her rib cage, starkly outlined, and the full swell of her breasts—highlighting with moving shadows her fast rise and fall of breath.

"No," she said, this time more firmly. "No; pluck these thoughts from your mind. I'll not have you feeling guilt for the few hours we loved together. Think, now: you set out the water jars. How long must it have taken them to fill? Minutes? What might we have done, oh, so constructively? Slept? Washed our clothes? Or run off and left our things, our water, everything? Be the man you are, Elron."

He nodded. "I shall. Now come. We have many hours yet."

With dawn came a lightening of the overcast. The rain had stopped. High overhead, clouds still boiled, still scudded one under another across the heavy sky. But no wind

touched the surface of the sands, where already crusts had formed. These clouds, Shannara guessed, were not rainclouds, but a re-formation of the vapors that had boiled off the desert sands during the night. It would not be long before the sand was dry once more, the sky clear.

But up ahead the way was no longer that of unending sand dunes. For high against the sky stood a great range of mountains, purple in the dawn twilight and ruggedly forbidding.

"We're much closer!" Shannara said, as she sank to her knees in weariness upon an out-thrust slab of rock.

Elron kicked at the sandy pebbles beneath his feet. "Do you know what day this is?"

She shook her head wearily.

"This is the seventh day we have been in this place. Five days we've traveled."

"You kept count?"

He nodded.

The land here was a strange mixture of the rugged hills beyond and the desert sands behind them. Slaglike slabs of soft, clay-colored rock seemed pitched upon the ground, thrusting up at odd angles, the sand drifted around and between them. In places the ground was washed bare, exposing a hard, baked clay that was almost brick. In the dry streambeds there were pebbles and small rocks, also of the same light clay in appearance.

Elron turned to survey the land behind them.

They had climbed—without knowing it, they had gradually climbed several hundred feet. When he looked back, it was upon the basin of the desert, stretching gray-white below him into the distance under the overcast dawn. Far off he thought he saw the towers of Vagar and the heavier gray of the sea, but he could not be sure, for the light was yet too dim.

They had come a better distance than he'd imagined. It buoyed him, and Shannara felt it when he returned to her. He bent, kissed her forehead softly, and said, "We must find a place to sleep the day, now that we've lost our cover sheet."

She'd been half-dozing, but his new optimism lifted her to her feet, and she followed him as he climbed a low hill, then beckoned her over the crest.

Below, on the other side, the hill was undercut, its strata exposed in jagged layers. A wet-weather stream had undercut the hill, carving out an overhang and leaving still a few pools of water.

"Elron! We've really found shelter," she said, her voice echoing her surprise.

"You did not expect it?"

"It's unwise to expect anything good out here. Isn't that what you believe?"

He slipped his arm around her and pulled her close. She moved willingly into the crook under his arm, letting her head fall against his chest and allowing her eyes to close.

"Yes, my dearest," he said softly. "That is what I believe."

He stowed the knapsacks beneath the cliff, then chipped at a gap between two strata with his rods until they were anchored there, and unrolled his leathers, hanging them there like curtains. Then he led Shannara to the largest of the shallow pools, where they removed their scanty clothes and bathed together.

The sky was quite light, faint shadows stretching west of the low cliff, when they fell asleep in each other's arms.

That evening Elron awoke, sweating. His body, where Shannara lay against him, was drenched with sweat. He looked out beyond the leathers at a blue sky streaked with golds. The sun was just behind the next hill.

His leathers were dry and stiff when he pushed them aside, and the smaller pools were gone, only the largest, now shrunk to a few feet in diameter, remaining.

He stooped to cup the water in his hands and bathe his face and drink. It was warm and flat-tasting. Still nude, he trod around the side of the low cliff and found a place to relieve himself.

He had just finished, when he heard a faint rustle behind him. Thinking it was Shannara, he did not turn, but

pretended to be doing what he had been doing, thinking of how he would tease her.

But the sound was not repeated, and, the hairs at the base of his neck bristling, he turned.

At first he saw nothing, heard nothing. Then he caught a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye. With reflexes long cat-swift, he leapt sidewise. His left foot came down on a scattering of pebbles that turned under his weight, and he jumped again.

A long, thick object, its tan the color of the rock, struck the place where he had stood, then coiled itself and raised its head.

A snake—he had seen few snakes in the forest where he'd always done his hunting, but he knew them for what they were. But in the forest snakes rarely attacked unprovoked; most were happy to slip away unnoticed.

Careful to watch where he put his bare feet, he backed again, stooped, and hefted three small stones. They were smooth-worn, and they fitted easily into his left hand. He transferred one to his right hand and drew back his arm.

When he threw the rock, his aim was only a little off, and his cast was powerful. The stone whizzed past the upraised head of the snake, striking the slab behind it and ricochetting off with a sharp crack.

Immediately, without pause, he drew back his arm a second time and threw again.

The snake was weaving its head back and forth; he never knew whether luck or skill won him the shot. The stone smashed the snake's head back into a sudden bloody pulp against the broad stone slab.

The snake coiled and uncoiled its body, thrashing it about, raising its squashed head and then letting it fall again.

He dropped his other small throwing stone, and wrenched up a slab two feet square. He struggled it over to the blinded snake and dropped it.

The snake's tail tossed about, slapping the ground for another several minutes before it stopped. He left it alone an equal time before pulling off the hunk of rock.

When he returned to the overhanging shelf, Shannara was awake and regarding him with sleepy eyes.

"I thought I heard you, banging about out there. I—Oh! What's that?"

He tossed his catch down onto the rock, where it sprawled full-length.

It was almost six feet long, its body disproportionately thick in comparison with the snakes he'd seen before: over four inches in diameter. Its head was only a bloody stump now, and its first third flattened and torn in places, but it was still a prize specimen. It lay underside-up, its pale body streaked with white.

"Ugh!" Shannara said.

But she read the story from Elron's mind and understood him when he said, "We wear our weapons from now on. This is no longer a country devoid of life, and that which lives here is hostile to us."

He rummaged in his knapsack for his belt and buckled it on over his breechclout. Then he attached his sword and scabbard and his short knife. The knife he drew and used to cut the snake open.

They had had little food for the last several days; there was nothing but a few scraps of dried fruit remaining. If this snake had edible meat, he would be grateful. He would not care if it tasted vile.

"Do you want to cook it?" Shannara asked, visibly holding back her revulsion, but aware of their needs.

"There is no wood—nothing for a fire," Elron answered. "Perhaps the heat of the desert will be enough to cure it."

"I have a way."

She showed him. She helped him cut the snake into strips of meat, cutting them loose from its skin and cleaning them.

She laid as many strips as would fit into their cooking pan—the same pan he had used to shovel sand—and set it aside. Then she took one of the energy guns and pointed it at a flat slab of rock nearby that measured only a foot across. She manipulated the gun's controls so that the beam that struck the rock seemed to splash over it, rather

than cutting through it. She played the gun's ray over the rock for several minutes, then released the trigger.

The meat began sizzling in the pan almost immediately after she set it upon the rock.

To their surprise, the meat tasted rather good. It was tough, requiring a good deal of chewing, but it was light and delicate in flavor, not unlike fowl, and its rich, hot juices were a treat too long gone without. They made pigs of themselves, eating in the single sitting more than half of the meat they had prepared.

The rest of the meat cooked and stowed in bags within their knapsacks, their thirst slaked by the rapidly diminishing pool, Elron's leathers rolled once more into the straps of his knapsack, they set out into the gathering dusk, the first stars of night already bright overhead. They walked hand in hand, and for Elron this night was one of promise, for he had found himself a mate and had already provided her meat, water, and shelter. Now he would bring her to a kinder land, in an exodus that paralleled the journeys of his barbarian ancestors and touched a deep racial bond within him.

Their way that night was brightly lit by the Red Moon, and this was good indeed, for their path led into increasingly broken land. Foothills which had seemed from the distance to swell gradually into the rolling base of the mountains were revealed now as great heaps of stone, boulders piled like pebbles, giant outcroppings of darker rock upthrust in savage cliffs and strange pillars. Here and there ravines meandered, some shallow, others both wide and deep, and without collapsing banks.

But by the same token, this was a country where life, incredible though it seemed, successfully struggled. In these tumbled heaps of rock there were water tanks, natural pools fed only by the rains, but fortuitously sheltered from direct sunlight, and without drainage. Stunted plants, most of them tiny but of incredibly toughened wood, grew in those cracks and crevices which could hold rudimentary soil near these basins. Twice they saw the shallow

grooves of a snake's passage in the dry silt near a small basin, although they saw no sign of any living creature itself. Nonetheless, Shannara walked with her hands on or near her holstered guns, and Elron kept his sword ready for easy draw.

The mountains loomed high over them now, great granite crags that stretched bleakly toward the sky. These were mountains they could not scale, through which they could not pass. But they had no intention of making such an attempt here. That which they sought in the mountains' shadow was cooler air, and water, either in the form of mountain streams or the pools below. Once at their foot, Elron and Shannara would follow the mountains north, where, she told him, there should still be a pass, for a great road had once run north and northwest from Vagar to Tanakor.

Chapter Ten

It was cooler in the mountains' shadow. While the forenoon heat seemed to be cupped and caught by the barren range, it cast a broad shadow across the foothills by afternoon, making the land almost bearable.

And there was water, too. Indeed, in minute nooks and crannies among the rocks they found a surprising amount of greenery, as well as tiny forms of animal life.

But Shannara's shoes did not fare well. When they stopped near dawn to make camp again, bedding down upon Elron's leathers and her jumpsuit, she stared sadly at her shoes in her hands.

"They won't be good for much more," she said. "Look—they're cracked on the sides, and the soles are paper-thin."

Elron took one and fingered it. "Shoddy," he said. "They were never meant for more than a light scuffing over the rugs of your decadent palaces."

"That's not true! These are outdoor shoes, much tougher than indoor wear." She put her hand to her mouth. She giggled. "I guess they are a bit light, compared with your boots."

He pulled his feet free. "I've had these boots for ten years, now. The bootwright has rebuilt them only twice. They're sturdily made."

"But—what about my shoes? They won't hold up much longer. The sand was bad enough, but these rocks . . . !"

"I'll do something about them when we wake up," Elron promised. "Just now it's not your shoes I'm interested in." He reached out his hand to her breast and stroked it.

They followed the mountains northward for three days. Elron had lined the inside of Shannara's shoes with snakeskin, and this had proved a tough and durable, as well as surprisingly comfortable, substitute.

They hunted and killed animals for food, finding the trails to waterholes and lying in wait in the late afternoon when the daytime creatures would appear—or just before dawn, when the nocturnal ones last quenched their thirst.

Mostly they killed small snakes and lizards, for although they saw the tracks of muneylike animals, these were too canny and never appeared within their sight.

The new diet seemed to agree with them, and both of them restored lost weight. Shannara's thighs grew thick with muscles, while her waist remained supple and quite slender. Her face filled out once more, however, and there was a coiled-spring liveliness in her step now that she had never shown before. "I look like an acrobat," she admitted, "but I feel healthier, stronger—much more fit. It must be the workout you give me each evening, dear Elron." And Elron in turn, no longer gaunt, could only admire her figure, for he had never preferred the soft indoor look in women, and this prancing wildebeest of a bronzed girl with her thick mane of black hair set his blood to hammering whenever he regarded her.

On their third day, they hit the lava fields.

They had just topped a low ridge that extended out, perpendicular to the mountain chain, into the desert. Beyond was a valley that, in the starlight, seemed covered with a great shadow, ominously dark and uninviting.

They stood upon the shelf of the ridge and stared down into the darkness. Overhead the sky was frosted with stars, the smaller moon still in the east and the Red Moon beyond the mountains to the west. The night air here was almost cool, but waves of heat rolled up out of the desert with the occasional drifting breezes from the east.

"Should we skirt it, do you think?" Shannara asked.

Elron peered into the valley, trying to find in it the secret of its shadowed appearance. "We'd have to go well out into the desert again," he said. "I think not." But Shannara knew that he was piqued as much by curiosity as anything.

He led the way down until they were directly confronted by the dark, porous rock.

It looked like a curiously frozen sponge. A tracing of it crossed before them like a narrow stream, divided from the valley floor beyond by an upthrust of more common rock. It seemed to be a hardened mass that had once indeed followed this course in a liquid flow, curling around obstructions, widening and narrowing as the slope of its bed steepened or gentled. Yet it was not at all smooth in configuration: cracks and fissures could be seen from close up, and its surface was clearly porous, studded with protrusions and pocks.

Elron leaned down and poked at it.

It was hard and unyielding; indeed, it felt rather sharp. He kicked at a chunk of it that was connected to the rest by a narrow stem. It broke off, and he picked it up. It made a good handful, but felt lighter than it should for a rock of that size. Where it had broken he could see a clean new surface, pocked with hundreds of tiny holes suggestive of air bubbles. Its underside too was jagged and irregular and open with tiny passages.

He passed the piece to Shannara. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Lava," she said. "I've not seen it, but I've heard of it."

"Lava?"

"It comes from the ground. In times of earthquakes and tumult, mountains break open and disgorge fire and lava. It is a kind of molten rock—hot and liquid. When it cools, it becomes like this."

"I see. And is this lava safe, then?"

"Safe in that it's cool enough. This has probably been here many years. Beyond that, I . . . I don't know."

"We'll have to try it then." He gave a glance at the stars. "We have only a few hours until sunrise—far too short a time to skirt it without being caught down there —in the desert."

And so they ventured out onto the lava beds.

The entire valley was perhaps a mile across; a valley formed between two outthrust buttresses of the mountain range. Lava had once flowed down from high in the mountains, finding this valley a direct channel to the desert and filling it from side to side with a river of fire.

Eventually the lava had cooled, becoming a permanent new floor in the valley.

The lava was not black, as might have been supposed. Elron discovered later that in direct sunlight it was a dusky rust-red, with darker, sometimes very dark, gray spots here and there. The piece he'd kicked loose and kept was a mottled color, ranging from brownish orange to deep charcoal. But the convoluted and porous nature of its surface trapped light in a curious fashion, and from any distance the rock appeared coal-black, even in the sunshine of high noon.

The most important feature of the rock, they discovered soon, was its uneven surface. No single foot was on a level, and invisible cracks and holes one to six inches deep—each quite pocked with smaller indentations, and thus almost impossible to see—were everywhere. It was like walking upon much-scruffed sand, with the single important difference that here there was no give: for all its spongy-looking texture, this lava was unforgivingly hard.

A second fact, quickly discovered when Shannara tripped and fell, was that lava was abrasive and quite

sharp. The small protrusions with their tough barklike appearance could carve a hand thrust against them as easily as might broken glass. Shannara's palms were lacerated and quickly covered with glistening droplets of blood.

Elron helped her to a sitting position, then took some of their precious water (now entirely gleaned from mountain streams) and one of the squares of cloth originally torn as a face mask, and carefully washed her hands. When he was finished, the faded cloth was streaked with blood, and more still oozed from her stinging hands. Fortunately, she had caught herself with her hands and had not scraped her legs, her knees, or her arms. But both foresaw that possibility.

"Should we dress?" Shannara asked.

Elron pondered the point. "If you fall again, you will still catch yourself with your hands, most likely. Better we bind your hands with cloth."

"My hands, and my behind, if I am to remain sitting for much longer," she said. Her thin panties were scant protection.

They continued, but soon she had a new complaint. "Elron? Could you take a look at my shoes?" She braced herself against his shoulder and lifted a foot.

He ran his hands tenderly down her calf and sighed at the damage her shoes had suffered. Very little of the sole remained, and even the sides were scuffed and cut quite badly.

It took him twenty minutes to bind snakeskin (from a more recently killed and consumed snake) over the outside of her shoes and feet. He tied the skins at her ankles. They made her feet more bulky and thus more awkward, and this slowed them even more, for they had already been picking their way over and through the lava with care. Elron said nothing of his fears for his own much-worn boots but resolved to cut up his leather if necessary for either or both of them.

It was only a mile, but it was the longest mile they had ever traveled. The sun was beginning to lighten the sky before they had crossed the beds.

Twice they had come upon deeper chasms, long fissures

that reached unguessably into the ground, but these had been narrow enough to jump. The second one had caused Elron to turn his ankle when he hit the other side, the lava being deceptively uneven there. After that, his limp slowed them even more, although he refused to stop. Shannara worried about the likelihood of his ankle swelling badly within his boot.

Then the sun was carving across the face of the world, its rays striking them side-on and turning the surface of the great lava flow into a chaos of light and shadow. Both sweated freely now, for the far side of the valley was within easy sight, and the temptation to hurry was a strong one, and yet dangerous. If anything, the lava was even more treacherous now, the inky shadows of its surface all the more concealing.

But finally they stepped once more onto solid land, feeling a vast relief that linked their spirits in common thanksgiving for this natural phenomenon of a steady, relatively flat, and comparatively unchallenging ridge of thick, heavy, ordinary rock.

They'd had no late-night–early-morning meal, nor the chance to hunt one, and they saw no water nearby, but they made no effort to find any. They sought only the closest halfway-suitable shelter, and there they fell quickly into a deep sleep.

Elron's ankle was only lightly sprained, Shannara decided that evening, but walking on it—especially over the rough, uneven surface of the lava bed—had aggravated its condition. It was a bloated, angry red now, and she was uncertain of Elron's ability to put on his boot over it.

She dug into her knapsack for her jumpsuit, and from it she tore several long strips of cloth. Her own hands were mostly healed now, but the bandages she had used were too small for her purposes.

She boiled their urine, which she had collected in a pot, and poured this over Elron's ankle into another pot, repeating the process several times. At first it had seemed to scald, but it also seemed to reduce the swelling and

the pressure. The urine, she said, had not been used simply because they were short on water, but also because its own acids and poisons would draw out the poisons of the swelling. Elron was not at all certain that he believed this; yet it worked, to the extent that when she tightly wrapped his ankle with the strips of cloth, he could again slip on his boot and stand without too great a discomfort. But he insisted on scouring the pots with sand, and Shannara's teasing reminder of the measures he'd felt driven to while out on the desert only made him the more obstinate.

The climb over the ridge was an easy one. It was not yet sunset, but long shadows stretched purple across the foothills where they climbed and out across the desert floor. The lava bed was now, when they looked back upon it for the last time, almost sheltered in the larger shadow and hardly visible for what it was.

The sight beyond the ridge was quite visible, however, and totally obvious.

Shannara had got ahead of Elron, since he favored his lame leg in climbing, and thus it was she who saw the road first.

"Oh, Elron! It's here! Come see—come see!"

He crested the gentle ridge and shared her view.

Below, winding out of the eastern desert, was a wide, flat strip of black. It seemed to disappear before it reached the eastern edge of the evening shadows, probably buried in the shifting sands. But it cut a clean path through a low foothill as it approached the mountains, then turned north, paralleling the ridges, climbing slowly up into deepening twilight.

"It's the road!" she said excitedly. "We've come to it!"

Elron was less excited, more aware of the reality of the situation: this road was thousands of years old, long unused and untended. It was good, yes, to find a road to ease their way and point a path through the bleak mountains, but it did not supply a vehicle for its passage; it did not guarantee an end to their weary travels.

Shannara felt these thoughts, but her spirits were not dampened. "Remember how we longed for solid footing when we were on the sand?" she asked. "And for flatlands when we began climbing the hills? And for just anything else, when we were back there, this morning? This road—ah, but you haven't walked upon it yet! You don't know the kind of roads they once built."

Elron noticed her use of "they"—not "we"—although it would have been as proper. This trip was changing the girl. Increasingly she lived in the present moment, no longer clinging to the distant past from which she'd come or to their future goals, now so long delayed. In this great trek, and in Elron himself, she had found a present, a *now,* which required all that she had in herself to be, and there was nothing left for dreaming of things undone. She was *going*: in that lay her new reality.

Just now she was focused upon the road and what it meant for them, ignoring the swift progression of these thoughts through Elron's mind. And that, he guessed, was just as well. Not for the first time, nor the last, he speculated idly on the effects and ramifications of a woman who could if she chose unfurl all one's secrets. . . .

The road's surface, not quite so smooth as it had looked from the distance—pitted here and there; weathered by sand and wind and water—was of the same obsidian black that had been revealed in the structures of the City Vagar. It was quite hard and, even where worn, very much easier to walk upon. The road was incredibly wide by Elron's standards: a small company of men could ride abreast along its way. Shannara tried to explain to him about the great behemothlike vehicles that had plied this road in other times, but he could not visualize objects the length of a good house, if much narrower, that could somehow, without even a pretension of wings, ride upon the air. "But—why should they need this road? Why not simply fly higher?"

It was a good question and one that Shannara found she had no vocabulary to answer. It was not enough to say that they did not truly fly, but only floated on thin

cushions of air. If they could float on air at all, Elron insisted, they could float as high as the birds who rode the currents of the wind.

The road climbed steadily, although at a gentle grade, always leading a little deeper into the mountains as it did so. In places it sheered through hill crests; in other places it spanned valleys and ravines with broad-based embankments. Always its curves were lazy, its grades light. It was indeed, Elron had to admit, much easier, much swifter going.

Only one thing bothered Elron: they had sighted and killed but a single snake that evening, and that before actually starting on the road itself. As they climbed higher into the mountains, there seemed less and less sign of life. He had seen no water, and few of the straggly gray plants grew here. The mountains themselves seemed to be of living rock—great upthrust cliffs banked with shale. There was little soil and little support for even the most basic forms of life. Water would not flow steadily here; if found at all it would be in still pools. Shannara knew this as he knew it, he realized, but she said nothing, and they both concentrated their energies upon the climb.

By morning they found themselves sufficiently within the mountains themselves that they could no longer see the desert, and dawn came upon them more suddenly than they'd expected. But shelter was easily found, and they curled within a hole that was almost a cave in the cliffside. It was coolly sheltered from the sun's rays and large enough to stretch out in, which they did, after eating a brief meal. Elron was growing tired of snakemeat.

Two days later, he would have welcomed the sight of even a scrawny, one-foot-long snake.

The road had climbed high into the mountains, and although it still followed a generally northerly course, it twisted among far higher peaks. The land they passed through was bleak and uninviting and without any sign of life.

Their food was gone now, and their water, as well. They could only press on, in hopes that around another corner

would be at least a pool of water—something to sustain them and keep them alive and going.

The nights had become much cooler now, even cold, since they were without their clothes. The last night, not long after midnight, they had collapsed into a huddle upon the surface of the empty road, too cold and exhausted to continue. Already their minds were numbed; neither thought of donning the clothes they carried. Their present scant mode of dress had become their "clothes" to them now.

They had not awakened until the direct rays of the sun shone brightly down upon them, and then it was to luxuriate in the warmth and comfort of the sunlight. Here in these high mountains the sun seemed intolerably bright, but the air was so thin that its heat was welcome.

They struggled wordlessly to their feet and followed the road onward, almost blindly. Elron's head swam; his mouth was dry, and his stomach was just a tight, aching knot: a fist clenched in his guts.

Thus it was that when Shannara cried out suddenly, he did not react immediately. Then he swung to look stupidly at her.

"I—I stumbled against the rock," she said, pointing to a low shelf of rock that served as a wall along the eastern edge of the road. "And . . . something stung me!"

As he stared down at the reddening welt on her arm, he heard an angry buzzing sound, and his senses sharpened. "A bee!" he said. "You were stung by a bee!"

"Yes," she said. "And it hurts!"

"Where is it?"

"Right here—on my arm."

"No—not the sting! The bee! Where is it?"

"How would I know? What difference—?"

But Elron had turned away and was now cupping his hand to his ear, circling slowly, trying to find the bee from the sound of its buzzing.

"There!" he said suddenly, pointing toward a higher rock set back from the one next to the road. He pulled himself up onto the broad shelf of the first rock, and started seeking handholds to the second.

"Elron!" Shannara wailed. "Are you out of your—oh!" It came to her then what he wanted, but even as she picked the thought from the surface of his mind, it was followed by black thoughts and Elron's bellow of rage.

"It's dead, dammit!"

He came back to the edge of the shelf and sat there, his legs dangling. "It must have left its stinger in you," he remarked bitterly. "And now it's died."

"Have a little thought for me, Elron," Shannara said, in a burst of tearful temper. "Look at my arm!"

Indeed, her arm was now swollen from the poisons of the sting. Elron dropped to the road and took her arm in his hands, holding it close to his face.

"Ah . . ." he said. "Here." He pried into the center of the swollen area with the tip of his knife. Then he had the tiny sliver of the bee's sting on his knifepoint.

Shannara's arm bled where he'd cut into it, but the blood only oozed thickly. Once again dehydration was hitting her.

"I was thinking of you, you know," Elron said softly.

"I—I know that, dear," she said, burying her face in his neck and chest.

"The bee—if we could have followed it, it would've led us to water, and perhaps to its nest. But now . . . It may have been miles from either. There's no knowing."

She nodded, butting her head softly against his warm, hairy chest, feeling his beard against her forehead.

"It seems as though we never can come far enough," she whispered. "Never far enough to find safety, and life."

Elron held her close and stroked her hair. He was about to reply, when his ears caught the faint sound of buzzing.

"Shannara!"

"Yes! I heard it too! Can you find it?"

Another bee! And this one he must find and follow.

Chapter Eleven

This bee, like the first, was circling up above the second shelf of rock. With all the strength and cunning he could still manage, Elron climbed up the twelve-foot face of the nearly perpendicular cliff, and that which he found there exceeded his hopes.

"Shannara!"

"Yes, darling," she replied, already tuned to his thoughts. "I know!" She emptied the knapsack he had left below, and put into it a handgun, the empty water canisters. and the bag they had also used for water.

She climbed to the first low shelf, then tossed the knapsack up to him. He caught it and, laying it on the narrow shelf he now occupied, quickly opened it.

This shelf slid back under an overhang of yet higher cliffside and slanted back, meeting the undercut cliff in a thin wedge. And in this sloping cut, water had collected. Safe from the sun, it collected with every rain. From marks on the rock, he could see that it had once been much fuller—but it had been over a week since the last rain—if, indeed, that rain had penetrated this far into the mountains.

But the pool of water was not all. Clustered under the low, slanting roof that shadowed the pool was the hive of the bees!

The hive was a thick, heavy, doughlike mass, perhaps two feet through in its thickest parts. It extended from the rear of the cut almost to the edge of the cliff, a matter of at least three feet, and it was more than four feet wide. This was indeed a venerable nesting-place.

The shelf was over twenty feet long. The water collected at its low end, and the beehive, surrounded by the low murmur of its inhabitants, was at the upper end, safe from flooding.

First he filled the canisters and the waterbag. He wanted to take no chance of losing this water. And he drank a goodly amount there on the spot.

The bees seemed not to have noticed him yet, but quite soon they were certain to.

Leaving the knapsack where it was, he crawled on his belly into the water. It was shallow and barely covered him when he lay prone, only his head and one arm remaining out of the water. It was a tight squeeze, for the overhead roof of rock was only about eight inches above the water here.

In his hand he held the energy gun. He had adjusted it according to Shannara's instruction so that it fanned out a low beam. He aimed it at the rock above the hive and thumbed the trigger.

The air seemed to ionize and glow as he swept the beam downward, over the hive and the bees buzzing about it. The bees already in the air glowed bright sparks, then winked out of existence. But the next moment, as he brought the beam back over the hive, a whole cloud of the furious insects boiled out to do battle.

This was the most dangerous moment. He had to catch them all with his heat beam, without destroying the hive behind them, but yet without letting them get at him. His only defense, if they got inside his beam, would be to submerge himself in the water and choose between drowning and death by a thousand stings. Of the two he believed he preferred to drown.

But the bees, an angry mass surging from the hive, formed their own protection for the hive itself, and he cut them all down with his gun.

He swept the hive twice more, giving it flashes of heat without, he hoped, damaging its contents. No more bees appeared, except those that winged in singly now and then from outside, and these made easy pickings.

Gingerly, he crawled from the water and, dripping, approached the hive.

A great charred mass of black objects covered the rock floor like a carpet. He singed them all again, in case a few might still live. It was a massacre, but it was neces-

sary. He felt no compassion for these dead creatures, for he knew that this was not a world in which one could live on sentiment. This would be the end of this great hive of bees, but hardly the end of all bees, and insects had never seemed to Elron to have sufficient personality for him to regard them individually. One might as well despair for the grass one trod upon. Nonetheless, the stench of burnt bees was an unpleasant one, and he wanted to hurry now and be done with it.

As soon as he cut into the hive with his knife, he smelled the honey; it came dripping out of the comb as his knife cut through the wax cells. He cut a large chunk loose and took a bite from its center.

Rich, sticky syrup spilled over his beard. The honey was faintly warm and quite runny—most likely the result of his heat beam. Its flavor was thick as musk in his throat, and he chewed and swallowed the wax of the comb after it with vigor. Then he moved out to the edge of the ledge and peered down at the waiting Shannara. "Here!" he called. "Catch! Eat!" and he threw the large hunk of honey-filled comb down to her.

The hive was constructed in cells, and he managed to remove most of them without rupturing them. He cut away the portion that had no honey, leaving it on the grave of the dead bees, a solitary reminder of his rape of their kingdom.

They gorged themselves on the honeycomb, but they had barely consumed a tenth of it. It was an overwhelming amount, and Elron hardly knew what to do with it.

Shannara had the answer: her jumpsuit. She tied its legs at their ends, and together they stuffed the interior with the honeycomb. She pinned it shut at the top, where cloth had been torn away, and Elron slung the arms of it over his knapsack, tying them in place. Before they set out once more, he boosted her to the high shelf and joined her in a bath, which took most of the stickiness off them.

Honey is a predigested food, a natural carbohydrate. Its wax is pure roughage but fulfills a necessary function as such. What was more, Elron saved some of the beeswax, saying that it could be useful for many purposes, and not

elaborating further. The honey served them as both food and water (they used their real water sparingly) for the next two days, during which they climbed to the highest point of the mountain pass and began their descent.

The road they were following did not cut directly across the mountain range, but rather followed a northward course that cut slantwise through the mountains. It made a longer route through the mountains than the path they'd made across the desert from Vagar.

However, the going here on the wide road was vastly easier, for the road was in remarkably good repair. Only once did they have to climb and scramble over the loose footing of a slide that blocked the way, and although in several places one side of the road had been undercut and had collapsed, there was always ample room to slip by.

On the sixth day in the mountains they crossed the highest point and began the descent of the western side. It was a marked and obvious change, for now, for the first time, they found obvious signs of life. The air was heavier with moisture, and often misty in the early mornings. The western slopes were no longer bare rock faces, but dotted here and there with green, every crevice filled with shale that had deteriorated into life-sustaining soil. They found many more signs of animals, and more than once a day they passed within sight of clear mountain streams and occasional still, very cold pools.

It was like coming out of hell into paradise.

They ate meat again and drank clean water. On their second evening of the descent, Shannara made a stew of a small bounding animal Elron had caught, combining the meat with the roots, stalks, and leaves of plants she had found growing in the small mountain meadow where they'd made their camp. The stew was rich and savory, and for Elron it was a banquet indeed. They both happily gorged themselves and then made tumultuous love on the clean, damp grass beneath the warm stars.

Another four days, during which they restocked their packs with smoked and dried meat and more tuberlike roots that were pasty and spicy, and quite delicious with

meat, brought them down into the foothills, where at last they could glimpse the land beyond.

The road had kept to the valleys and folds between the hills, and to passes tucked between higher mountains, and they had not till now been given a chance to view the far horizon. Now, in the early forenoon, they crested a low rise and then stopped, hand in hand, to take in the panorama before them.

They still stood high in the mountain range, for the foothills fell quite sharply below this point. The air was thick with a blue haze that obscured the horizon, but closer at hand they could see a vast ocean of green stretching out in every direction below them.

It was like a physical balm for their eyes, and they drank it in. This was not the gray-green, welcome enough a sight in the higher mountains. This was a lush verdant hue that was at once both soothing and inviting, like a warm, rich carpet spread out at their feet. To the north, a thin black thread, their road picked its way here and there into the hazy distance.

Later in the afternoon, Elron thought he caught the glint of sunlight on water far to the west, but he could not be sure. The River Qar fed into a great bay—almost an inland sea—but whether this could be it he did not know. Nonetheless his heart raced a little at the thought, for this would be the first, if distant, sign of familiarity and home. Home was something he had almost forgotten how to believe in.

They traveled well now, walking in great mile-eating strides, a natural rhythm to the slap of their feet upon the road, a cadence they would not break for hours. For Elron this was not so unusual a thing, for he had always been a fit and hardy man. But Shannara found new wonder in it each day, for this was the awakening of a whole new life for her, a new kind of existence, and very much different from any she had ever known. She rejoiced in the strength and vigor of her man, Elron, and in the way she had learned to match it. The air felt clean and good to both her nostrils and her skin, and the thought of returning to heavy clothes that covered her body, and to

a cloistered indoor existence, was anathema. She was aware of her body now as she'd never been before, having always taken its existence for granted. This was not a vain preening before mirrors—indeed, she'd not seen her image in weeks now—not so much an awareness of *appearance* (although Elron often told her how beautiful she was, and she quite enjoyed that) as of *function*. Elron had taught her this, both in his own body-awareness as they strode side by side, and in his love for her and the things he taught her in the moonlight. Her skin seemed to glow, and her legs were powerful pistons, the blood surging through them hot with life. She breathed deeply now and was rarely winded, even by an evening's tempestuous bout.

She had not been a virgin, after all. But she wondered if she had ever known what physical love was before she'd met Elron. Before, it had been, in a sense, a social act, a way of being with someone. It had not been so different from other contact sports: somehow necessary, but never ultimately personal. She had had an itch, and from time to time had been with another who could scratch it, even as she did for him. That was all; in a sense sex had been for her the act of two strangers using each other.

Elron made her feel a woman. He was openly and laughingly lustful, bold and energetic. And yet he was also shy, sensitive, and thoughtful, never bullying, never hurtful. She could never have enough of him. His very manhood evoked the woman in her. When he looked at her and those special thoughts formed over the surface of his mind, her breath would come in short stabs, and a chill of excitement would clutch her. Had he but known it, he could have taken her every time he'd wished it, for the wish was in itself enough. But then, they might never have come down from the mountains.

The road led down, ever down, from out of the high mountains, down into the foothills, and thence into the lowlands. And as it dropped, the surrounding land grew thicker with vegetation, more heavily overgrown, greener.

Soon there were no more quiet mountain meadows, but instead hill-covering thickets, heavy with underbrush, and low, bushlike trees.

They stayed on the road now. There was something about the dense growth that was no longer inviting, now that it surrounded them. Thick creeper vines strayed far out onto the road, narrowing it in places until it was little wider than a path, choking densely over its sides, growing in mudwashes and in the rotted plants of yesteryear that crept over more of the road each year.

It rained here. It rained a lot. A day seldom passed without a brief shower, sometimes accompanied by thunder and lightning—although the latter never struck close by. It was hot in the midday sun, although by no means the heat of the desert, and it was humid, as well. It was easy to work up a good sweat, and this was sweat that did not instantly disappear, sucked immediately into the air. It dripped down Elron's face, into his beard, down across his chest and back, down his thick thighs. For Shannara it was the tickling of her hair, matted against her shoulderblades and her back, her neck hot with sweat that found its way down between her breasts. She longed to reach behind her, to lift her long hair with both hands and fan it out from her, just for the air and the relief.

Their clothes never quite dried, after becoming soaked in the rain. Each was grateful now that they wore so few clothes. Even so, their precious few articles of clothing threatened to rot and disintegrate on their very bodies.

"This is a jungle," Shannara said, as they prepared to make a night camp in the center of the narrowed road. It was flat now, and the heavy foliage rose high over them, the mountains only occasionally to be glimpsed behind them.

"A 'jungle'?"

"A land where it rains often and is always warm. The plants grow and grow. They never stop growing. They devour themselves. See what a wall they make?"

Elron nodded thoughtfully. "I wonder how much longer we'll find the road unblocked," he mused.

They found the unhappy answer early the following day. Before them, the black obsidian of the road sank slowly, gradually, into and under water.

The dense growth of vegetation continued uninterrupted along each side of the road, rising like green walls. There was no sign of water in that jungle of matted vines and everpresent leaves. But ahead of them the water crept from under the walls of foliage to slip across the road, a quiet pool.

The water was clear for only a short way. It seemed to have a black pigment suspended in it, invisible where it was most shallow, but quickly darkening, where deeper, into impenetrable murk. And only yards farther, wide leaves floated upon the water's surface, heralds of the jungle closing in beyond.

Farther ahead there was only the solid wall of the jungle.

"We have reached the end of the road," Elron observed. He unlimbered his handgun. "Can we use these to cut our way through this heavy growth?" He pulled at the vines on the road to his right. They were sturdy and resisted him.

"I don't know how many charges we have remaining," Shannara said. "But if we must use our guns, well . . ." She shrugged.

They found higher, drier ground to the east, and using the heat beams, they slowly, laboriously made their way through the jungle.

It was often a matter of tediously pausing every few yards, triggering the handguns down a short aisle, and then thrusting on, to repeat the maneuver. Cutting with heat was not the most pleasant way to make their way, either. Always the thick smell of unpleasant scorch followed, to linger in their nostrils, and often vines heavy with sap would explode from the heat, bursting with a loud report, sometimes scattering splintery shrapnel or puffs of steam. "At least we'll be sure of starting no uncontrollable fires," Elron remarked sarcastically. He'd tried substituting his sword, swinging its edge against the vines, but it had little cut to its edge when sharp, and now it

was quite dull. In no time he'd worked up a fierce sweat and accomplished almost nothing. They went back to using heat guns.

Insects flitted about them, lighting on their exposed and sweaty skins. Shannara was soon swatting back and forth with both hands at herself. Elron simply ignored them. They did not appear to bite; they only wanted the salty moisture of his perspiration.

Not until dusk did they break from the heavy confines of the jungle. Here, the heavy vines thinned and an occasional outcropping of rock thrust its way up through sandy loam. Trees and grasses grew here, a veldt with too thin a topsoil to support the greater demands of the jungle.

The grasses grew waist-high and moved in soft ripples before the evening breeze. Elron and Shannara trampled an area flat, and fell into each other's arms in an exhausted sleep.

In the middle of the night, Elron was awakened by an ominous rumbling.

He lay in the momentary stillness and waited for it to repeat itself. Soon it did. It seemed the call of a great beast, a rumbling roar that began in vibrations more easily felt than heard, threatening and commanding but, thankfully, distant.

The Red Moon was in the west, slipping its rays under a low cloud cover that scudded in broken pieces across most of the black sky. Elron sniffed the air but could smell nothing beyond the heavy musk of the jungle and the dry dust of the veldt. Slowly, he went back to sleep.

That morning they headed north again, skirting the irregular edge of the jungle, occasionally cutting through dense shrubbery but avoiding brush too thick to be pushed through. It was a golden day, the blue sky above dotted with fleecy clouds and the mountains to the east sharply etched against the sky. The grasses whipped about their legs but parted easily, and it was almost a meadow stroll.

Here and there were copses of trees, small clumps of from perhaps five to a dozen, closely grouped, islands in the

rippling sea of grass. The first of these they skirted, but Elron noticed something peculiar about several of the trees. Although they still appeared healthy, their leaves still green, the bark of their trunks was shredded, as though ripped and torn by many daggers. These open scars extended to perhaps twice Elron's height, and for reasons he could not entirely explain, he was worried.

Shannara found Elron's worrying now a part of her own, but she said nothing. Until Elron knew better what was now only instinctively bothering him, questions would be pointless. This perceptivity of hers had long since endeared her to Elron. She never nagged, never asked foolish questions. She felt; she understood.

Then, as they passed beneath the branches of a tree on the outer edge of another copse, Shannara screamed!

Elron whirled, heatgun automatically in his hand now, to face a hurtling bolt of snarling yellow.

He threw himself to the left, signaling Shannara with his mind, *to the right—split!* Then he was kneeling and thumbing the gun for all he was worth.

The great creature had leapt from the branches of another tree. The thin red heat beam carved through the air, slicing through its shoulder—and then suddenly winked out.

Elron feverishly thumbed the trigger button, without effect. The creature, monstrously large, was on the ground now, and its howls of rage and pain were deafening, their subsonics plucking at his very bones. It lifted a huge yellow head and bared tusklike fangs over a foot in length. Its right foreleg hung useless, but it was still on its feet.

The gun would not work. Elron accepted this fact in a single moment, and threw the gun at the animal, scoring a hit as it flew into the creature's mouth.

The beast stopped, bewildered for a moment, snapping its mouth closed reflexively and then dropping it open again with a mewling snarl. Elron hoped it had lost a few teeth at least; the gun was now a splintered hunk of junk in the grass.

He drew his sword. He'd not had time to think of what

Shannara might be doing now, and no time to look. Their splitting apart had confused the animal, and now if he pressed his attack, it would not have a chance to turn on Shannara.

He ran forward, his sword outthrust.

The animal sat back on its haunches and reared up, suddenly towering over him. Its nearest leg hung dead, streaked with blood, and for a moment that fact seemed to take the creature by surprise. Then it was twisting, swinging its left forepaw out at him, huge talons extended.

He had no choice. He ducked under and in, driving his sword into the huge beast's soft, furry underbelly, driving and cutting.

He felt his knapsack ripped from his back, and then the animal was folding over him, collapsing down on him, smothering him with its hot woolen pelt. He tried desperately to dodge to one side, to drag himself free. Blood, hot and sticky, was everywhere, covering his face, blinding him. A great weight surrounded him.

He went down.

Chapter Twelve

THE TERRIBLE weight over him seemed to shudder, and then from a vast distance Elron thought he heard Shannara screaming.

Then he felt a tug on his left foot.

For a moment he did nothing. Then he could feel the grip of hands at his ankle. A keening wail filled his mind: a lover's lament for her dead.

Dead? He was not dead. Not yet.

He tried to brace himself on his arms. The weight over him was too great. He tried pushing against it, pushing himself back out, away from it. Blood-thick fur slid slowly over his back.

The death-wail stopped. Sunshine washed over it, and then joy. Hands seized his ankles anew and pulled desperately.

With Shannara's help he managed to struggle free of the dead animal's crushing bulk. For long minutes he was content to lie still in the tree-shaded grass, staring with half-closed eyes at the patterns of the leaves against the sky, while Shannara cooed to him, cradling his head in her lap, touching him, kissing him with feathery kisses. Then she laid his head down gently, took a canister of water from her knapsack, and began sponging the blood from his body. He was covered with it: a sticky, congealing mess that was already attracting insects.

"I heard you," he said softly. "Before I . . . got out." He indicated the fallen beast with his head.

"You heard me?" Shannara asked, her tone puzzled.

"You were screaming at first," he said. "Ouch!"

"This stuff is scabbing on you," Shannara said, for a moment preoccupied with the drying blood matted in his body hair. Then she added, "I didn't scream. Not after that first time, when the thing sprang. I felt it then —like a *hunger,* nibbling at my mind. I screamed before I saw it."

"No, not then," Elron said. "When you were trying to pull me free—you thought I was dead. Then, when I moved, it was like your mind had turned from night to day. . . ." He paused.

"My mind?"

"Shannara?" he asked.

"You—you felt my thoughts!" she exclaimed. She dropped the cloth she'd been scrubbing him with and leaned over him. Her breasts brushed over his chest, and then she was kissing him, and in his mind he seemed to feel a sunburst of emotion.

The great animal was a giant cat, a great fanged beast whose reach, when on hind legs and stretched upwards,

would not be less than fourteen feet. This explained the shredded tree trunks in this as well as other copses: they were scratching posts.

Lying dead upon the ground, even stretched full length, it seemed shrunken and smaller, the animation of life departed. Its coat was a tawny yellow, its underbelly lighter, almost cream. They had to cut tree limbs to use as poles in turning the creature over to free Elron's sword and knapsack.

As Elron had attacked the animal, Shannara had fired her own energy gun, its ray reduced to needle-size and at its highest power, into the creature's head. They would never know which of them had killed it.

Elron's sword was wedged into the gaint cat's rib cage, and took much struggling to free it. Once it was free, he used his dagger to cut out the cat's fangs. They had no use for its pelt, and its head was too large to carry, but he wanted some trophy of this dangerous kill.

Then they carved chunks of meat from its shoulders and haunches, cooked one roast on a spit (a metal rod: one of the four he still carried) over a live fire for dinner; and then went on, leaving the carcass to be devoured by the other creatures of this wild land.

Thereafter they avoided the copses of trees.

Two more days saw them in hillier country, with stands of pine and low brush among rocky outcroppings. The nights were cooler here, the days pleasant. It reminded Elron of the lands near Qar, and he said as much.

"Ah, your City Qar," Shannara said softly. "Can it be real . . . after all this time?"

And then, on the afternoon of another day, they descended a low wooded hill and came upon the eastern branch of the River Qar.

"We are but a few miles east of our destination," Elron said. "Across that river, to the west, lies City Qar—and its warlock rulers!"

"Elron," Shannara said, taking his arm. "I am afraid."

Elron nodded.

"I have no real magic—only my ability to glimpse

thoughts; and even that must depend upon close contact or strong bonds for surety. And we have the handguns. Will they—can they be enough?"

He drew her close to him, his arm a comforting ring around her. "We must have courage, Shannara. We have defeated every obstacle thus far thrown in our way. We shall not fail now."

"Brave words. . . ."

Anger rippled through him.

"You wish to stop *now?* To turn your back on them? To carve out some secret holding in the wilderness?"

"Elron! Stop!" She pulled away from him and turned to face him, tilting her head back so that she could look up at him, into his flinty eyes. "If you could read my thoughts now you would know that is not true. Yes, of course I wish we did not have to face these—these monsters! And now that you mention it, I could be content, in other circumstances, to live alone with you and bear our children in the wilderness. I have come to love you, my Elron, and to want and need you very much. And I am troubled by the antagonists we face. You have not seen into even the outer portions of their souls, as I have. But I know our duty, and I could never dissuade you from it.

"These have been hard weeks we have spent together, alone. But they have also been satisfying for me. They are, in a way, their own reward; for being with you, at your side both day and night, has been the most wonderful gift of my life. Perhaps I am reluctant to see this journey end, to see us at last face to face with our enemies. Perhaps"—her voice broke—"perhaps I fear for us, in our confrontation with the Others. Oh, Elron! I have had you for such a very short time. . . ." She threw herself into his arms and buried her head in the fur of his chest, soft tears squeezing from under her eyelids and marking a warm trickle down his skin.

Elron held her gently and stroked her soothingly.

They planned what strategy they could. They would wait for darkness, then cross the river and approach the city overland from its rear. There were no gates there—the

secret of good defense, the first Duke of Qar had noted, was a single access to be guarded—but a man determined could scale the wall easily enough.

The problem was what to do, once in Qar.

Their best bet was the remaining two energy guns. Unfortunately, each was on its last power cell, and they could only hope there would be enough power for them to strike with certainty. The Others would have their magic, but the use of their vast powers, Shannara told Elron, always weakened them, for the energy they required for their feats of magic must come from their own bodies. Elron put little stock in the idea of wearing them out, however. He recalled too well their treatment of him when last he'd been in Qar.

They cooked themselves a good meal, using the last of their tubers, baked under the fire over which they roasted their meat, and eating raw with the meal wild onions they'd found growing along the riverbank. Dessert finished their last honeycomb.

Shannara took her tattered, sticky, and smelly jumpsuit down to the river and washed it out. She hung it over the branches of a bush to dry in the dying rays of the setting sun, and then took Elron's leathers from his battered knapsack to spread them out and air them. The nights were cooler here, and they were returning to civilization of sorts, where, Elron had assured her, people rarely appeared in such light dress unless it was for quite particular purposes. To that she'd wrinkled her nose and laughed.

The few tasks done, they'd bathed in the river and then stretched out quietly, side by side on the grass.

Elron turned his head and looked at Shannara. She was lying on her back, as he was, her eyes closed and her body awash in the red twilight. Her breasts were flattened but still pointed twin nipples toward the sky. As he watched them, they began to pucker and bunch, growing more erect, larger and more protuberant. He glanced back at her face. Her eyes were closed still, but at the corners of her mouth a faint smile played in covert mischief.

Gently, he traced one finger delicately around the aure-

ola of each breast, watching her nipples stiffen even more. Then, so lightly as to be almost tickling, he let his fingers wander over and about her breasts, down their cleft, and down over her lightly-downed belly, and to the tufted mound below, skirting that last as though suddenly afraid of its humid black jungle, to work a tracery upon her parted thighs.

Throughout, he watched her face.

Finally, as his finger approached the junction of her thighs once more, the mask broke. Her eyes popped open, and she began laughing. He pivoted over her, kissed her, and then entered into her suddenly hungry embrace.

They made love then, as though there might never be another opportunity.

The Red Moon was up, but slipped now and then behind large clouds. The night was perfect.

They waded across the river and dressed shiveringly. But warmth returned within minutes as they set out over the gently rolling, lightly wooded hills on this side of the river.

Two hours' brisk walk brought them twice past signs of human life: once an outlying goat ranch; then a sleeping caravan from farther north. Elron had debated waking the caravan's leader and warning him of the dangers ahead, but he had little enough to point to and no wish to stir up a possible delay.

Now the way was growing foggy, and this in itself was a sign of two things: the continued dominion of the two Others, and the nearness of the city.

They were following a road, but the road detoured around the wall, and in the darkness they lost it, blundering on now until stopped by the very wall itself.

"Your light," Elron whispered.

"No good," Shannara replied. "I had to use its power cell for my gun."

Elron grunted, and then began feeling the face of the wall with his hands.

This was a sturdy wall, designed to repel warlike invaders, to resist a direct charge.

It was not designed to keep out a single stealthy man. The blocks were crude, rough-hewn. They were set without mortar. They offered many handholds for the adroit.

Elron soon found the holds he sought and was swarming up the wall. Shannara, with his memories to guide her, followed.

The top of the wall was broad, with a narrow walkway just over it, a few feet lower. No one was prowling or standing guard. No one had for years.

And with the years had come complacency. City Qar had never been besieged, never actually attacked. There were no guards on the wall and had not been for generations. And in those same generations of laxity, space had grown more dear and real estate within the city more valuable, the houses squeezing together, pressing close against the wall, even being built against the very wall.

A low window opened directly onto the guardwalk, as though its builder had slyly intended to use the wall and its parapet as a private balcony.

The house itself was typical of the city houses. The end house of a meandering block of rowhouses, it stood three narrow stories high, its lower floors stone-walled, the topmost frame-and-timbered. A steep roof of tile (slate was used as often) climbed over a narrow attic and pointed to the cluster of chimney pots at its peak. Ivy covered the outer walls and half the roof.

All this was not easily glimpsed, but a flickering streetlight below, haloed by the fog, cast some thin light, while close at hand light reflected from the open window.

Inside the window, a girl lay propped in her bed, reading a book by the light of a bright oil lamp. She was quite startled when they stepped across the sill.

Elron and Shannara made a fantastic sight. Elron looked wild and fierce, his black beard and heavy black mane of hair long and uncombed. He wore his mail and leathers, quite stained by time and wear, the red of his tunic a rich and ancient scarlet. His face and arms were tough and leathery-looking, burned dark by the sun. In the low-ceilinged room, he was a great giant.

The woman beside him was obviously a sorceress—it

was the girl's first excited thought. She wore a strange torn garment that nonetheless molded itself to her womanly curves. Its bodice was torn away, and only a thin halter of cloth covered her mature breasts. The girl wished she looked so fine in so little.

It was the woman's face, though, that caught and held her. Framed by long waves of black hair, it was a face of both wisdom and beauty, deeply tanned, worn even, but knowing . . . understanding. . . .

Shannara spoke softly to Elron. "She is not hostile. She is a youthful romantic. We are the personifications of all her daydreams."

"Young lady," Elron said, addressing the girl, who now hugged her covers high against her neck. "Are you aware of the present state of the City Qar?"

"How—how do you mean?" she faltered.

"The Duke? Who rules?"

"The Dukes, you mean? But they have always ruled."

"She does not lie," Shannara said. "Her memories have been tampered with."

"Is she . . . ?"

"No, she is not in their direct thralldom." She turned to the girl. "Tell me, child, does the sun shine here?"

The girl's forehead wrinkled. "In the daytime it does."

"And at night? The stars shine, and the moons rise?"

She gave a nervous laugh. "Of course they do. How else?"

"Even now?"

Fog poked tentative tendrils into the open window.

"Of course."

Shannara shivered. "They have tampered with her mind. I fear that we shall find this everywhere."

"Did you come over the wall?" the girl asked. Her eyes were large. " 'Cause if you did, I have to report you."

Elron laughed easily. "No; we have simply been for a stroll along the wall and lost our way. May we take the stairs down?"

"How did you get up?"

"I told you. We lost our way. We came up another way."

"It's a pretty simple wall. I don't know how you could get lost on it."

"Elron," Shannara warned.

"Goodbye, young lady," Elron said, crossing to the door.

Shannara started after him, then suddenly pivoted. She threw herself on the girl and seemed to stroke the girl's neck. The girl fell, limp, back into the bed.

"She was about to scream," Shannara said. "There was nothing else."

"What did you do?"

"I paralyzed her. It will wear off all too soon, I fear. I only hope she awakes thinking it was all a dream."

There was no one in the dimly lit streets. It was as though the whole town was observing a curfew—which, Elron suspected, was exactly the case. They both moved quietly, making as little noise as possible, fearing to alert anyone by whom the alarm might be given.

Finally they were on the street at the back of the Ducal mansion.

This was where the kitchens and Ducal stables were, where tradesmen brought their wares and the staff passed in and out. It was from here that Elron had finally escaped, on that fogbound night when he had been catapulted into this incredible adventure.

Entrance was not difficult. Front doors were locked, but not the gates to the servants' quarters.

The halls seemed thick with a heavy, oppressive air, and a feeling of dread gripped and held them.

Shannara used her thought-sensing ability to search out the occupants of the great house, passing by those doors which led only to empty rooms, pausing at each that was occupied to verify that the Others were not there.

"There are many women in this place," Shannara whispered to Elron as they climbed the stairs to the third floor. "And each has a mind that does not dream. Does that seem as ominous to you as it does to me?"

"That they do not dream? I don't know; does everyone dream?"

"Always. Not to dream—that is like having one's soul turned off; like ceasing to exist for a time each night. These people, they seem to have lost their own existence." She shuddered.

They crept stealthily down a long hall that ended in a pair of double doors. "There," Shannara said, her fingers tightening on Elron's arm. "Beyond those doors: both of them. I feel their evil."

Elron unholstered his energy gun, while Shannara did likewise. He formed the plan in his mind. They would break through the doors, and Elron would take whoever was on his left; Shannara the other.

The hall was gloomy, only two torches illuminating its length. The walls were a somber paneling, dark and non-reflective. The two wide doors were also paneled, but heavy, solid-looking. A small latch was the only visible handle. Nervously, Elron lifted it.

The door swung easily open, its hinges carrying its weight smoothly and without protest.

Beyond, faint light from the street showed them a large room, deep in shadows. The room seemed not much smaller than the great hall below, although of course it must be. Two huge canopied beds loomed in the shadows. Elron nodded his head at one, then stole softly to the other.

He lifted one corner of the nearest canopy and peeked under.

He could see nothing. The interior was dark. Heavy, slow breathing issued from somewhere within the darkness.

He lifted the canopy further. A thin yellow shaft of light came in from the hall beyond. As he stood aside, it picked out the pasty features of Edwards, his short, fat tormentor.

He lifted his gun and trained it, fixed at its narrowest opening and highest power, on that almost cherubic face. Then he depressed the stud.

A deep scarlet beam, thin as a thread, glowed like a ruby in the gloom, and where it touched the fat man's face, it carved flesh from skull and ate the very skull itself. The stench of burning flesh and singed hair came

strongly to his nostrils, and he steeled himself to continue until the face of the warlock Edwards was only a charred and ruined thing, the stump of a lifeless creature.

Then he reached forward and whipped the covers back.

Shock hit him like a physical blow.

The dead body was that of a nude woman.

He backed quickly away, stumbling over his own feet, and as he did so, he felt the universe of his certainties crumbling about him, and he heard Shannara scream, her voice filling the room with terror.

He whirled to the other bed, and what he saw there sent a cold chill through him.

A giant monster—it must be Archer—had seized Shannara. Their two dark bodies pantomimed a soundless struggle.

He raised his gun and triggered it. Nothing happened. Its charge was spent.

His hand leaped for his sword, and he had started to draw it, when a crushing force drove him into oblivion.

Chapter Thirteen

He awoke to find a vise clamped to his skull. It tightened rhythmically, flashes of light appearing before his eyes. He could not move; he had no will to move.

The pain subsided slowly, and after a time he decided that it was only a blow to his head, and not the jaws of a vise at all, that sent lances of pain through his brain. It was some time more, however, before he could be certain of his ability to move. The roaring in his ears had subsided, and he let his head turn a little to his right.

Nausea welled up in him as his head began to whirl dizzyingly. He tried to take a firm grip on something—anything!—and his fingers clawed a rug. The reality of the sensation steadied him momentarily.

For a single moment his head was clear—clear enough for him to hear the mingled groans of pain and animal grunts that came from somewhere quite close by.

He lifted his head and opened his eyes. The scene he saw was one that engraved itself upon his memory, even before he comprehended it.

A low lamp sat on a table to one side, almost behind him, casting a soft glow over the bed not ten feet away.

It was the bed in which he'd killed—someone. Its curtains were open now. The bed itself was set low to the floor; he had no trouble in seeing its occupants. There were three naked, moving bodies in the bed. The one in the middle was Shannara.

A great red wave of rage struck him then, as he realized what he was witnessing, and as he fell back to the floor, his arms collapsed, and once more he lost consciousness.

When he came to once more, no lamp shone, but a gray light filtered cheerlessly through the windows, and he could see that he had not been moved.

His stomach felt gnawingly hollow, and he had trouble focusing his eyes. He pushed himself to a sitting position, feeling sick and weak. Then, without his being aware of it, a spasm had rolled up over him, and he was vomiting onto the rug at his side. Again memory occluded, and his next cogent awareness was that he was standing at the edge of the bed, clutching its post for support, a bitter acid taste in his mouth. His head throbbed with every beat of his heart, and that organ seemed to be racing alarmingly.

A small nude figure lay huddled in the center of the large bed, black hair obscuring her face. Beyond, half-hidden by shadows, the bedclothes were scorched and charred.

He looked around. There was no one else in the room: it was quite empty. The other bed was equally open and disarrayed, and empty.

He moved around to the side of the bed and touched Shannara's skin. It was cold.

For a moment black despair flooded him; then he saw that she was breathing. More: her body seemed to be shaking—a faint shivering vibration that was all the more frightening because she was apparently deep in sleep—and the room was not cold.

He reached out and stroked the hair from her face. Her features were drawn, and she flinched at his brief touch. He touched her again, and this time she shifted away from him. As she did so, her shivering increased and her teeth began to chatter.

"Shannara!" Elron whispered. "My Shannara!"

Her eyes opened wide, tortured and unseeing. Then she turned her head and saw him. Fear marked itself plainly upon her face, and she drew a deep, shuddering breath, then fainted.

Curses ran through his mind, imprecations mixed with fears and strangled hopes. What had they done to her, to his woman? He knew, somehow, and yet he did not know, could not, *would* not know.

A bowl of water stood on a stand nearby. He took a

cloth, wet it, and wiped his face. Then he ran his hand questingly over his head and found blood caked in his hair, and a swelling that screamed inside his head when he touched it. Very gingerly he patted the area with the wet cloth, and soon it was stained brown.

With a second cloth he went back to the bed and carefully drew open the limbs of the fetal creature who had been Shannara. Gently, he sponged from her the alien musk of others' sweat and dried effluvium. When he parted her legs he found blood, the dried remains of which testified quite certainly to her ill use. Tenderly he cleaned it from her, and as he did so she suddenly tensed and moaned, a low animal sound of pain. He cursed again, cursing not only those inhuman monsters who had done this thing to her, but himself as well, for bringing her into this.

The doors were locked. He tested them and was still shaking them, when he heard a soft sound behind him.

He turned, and saw Shannara standing, almost as though poised to leap, before the tall window.

"Shannara!"

Both of them moved simultaneously, she throwing herself forward, through the parted curtains, and he diving across the room.

He was the faster: he caught her, grabbing her by the waist. She went suddenly limp in his arms, and he dragged her back from the window.

"Would you kill yourself?" he asked, half in anger.

"Yes," she said.

She would not let him put her back on the bed. Her muscles strained, and she grew so rigid that he thought she would break in two before allowing it. He let her sink to the floor, then dropped beside her.

"Darling," he said.

She looked at him with stricken eyes, and he gathered her to him, holding her, stroking her gently, as he would a skittish beast. At first she flinched at his touch and trembled, but gradually she began to relax. He filled his mind with thoughts of love, of warmth and kindliness, of golden meadows and green leafy copses, of the taste of

rich honey and the smell of rain. For him as well as her, it was a purification, a moment of love outside the reality of their circumstances.

Before long she was snuggled in his arms, holding him, crying.

They had raped her, cruelly and repeatedly. They had not taken turns, but had possessed her simultaneously. She had been at first too shocked to resist, and then her defenses were too beaten.

She'd thought the giant form of Archer dead when she'd burned it with her gun. Then before her eyes it had shifted, grown smaller, more gently curved, and she was staring into the dead face of a girl no older than she —and suddenly arms were pinioning her from behind: arms she knew too well.

She felt vastly tricked. *The creature in the bed had been Archer.* She had not tried to probe his mind—she would never again after that first experience—but she had sensed his dreaming presence. And now, without warning, without telltale thought or emotion, he had seized her.

She thought to scream a warning to Elron, and then she was aware of his own awareness of the situation. His thoughts turned toward her, accelerated, and then suddenly ceased.

Edwards had thought he had killed the man, not knowing that Elron's thick shock of hair had cushioned the murderous blow. She did not betray her awareness of the fact—not then, and not later, after they had stripped her, forced her to the bed from which they flung a headless female corpse, and simultaneously forced themselves upon her. She had endured, stoically, knowing that in this very act of endurance she was losing something she had only shortly known; that she was sacrificing herself here so that they would not discover yet that Elron lived. And yet in so doing, she knew that she was destroying that which Elron had given her: her pride in her own sexuality and self. She would never again be able to think

of herself as clean and beautiful, never more be able to give and receive openly the act of love.

Some women she had known, three thousand years ago, had prided themselves upon their sacrifice. There were those, she knew, for whom femininity was selflessness: total sexual sacrifice—ultimate masochistic surrender. These women abjured themselves, renounced their rights to Self and Identity, and found in this sick surrender a kind of religious glory of abasement. It was a way of life, of thought, for which she'd had no sympathy, no empathy. She had met such a woman once, outwardly normal but betrayed by obsessive thoughts that fairly screamed her subjugation. Shannara had been repelled, as though she had overturned a rock and found a gray-white slug.

Now she could no longer reject that woman; the slug had crawled into her guts.

It had been midday when Elron awakened. After comforting Shannara at least to the extent that now she was dry-eyed and would speak to him, if in a low, almost inaudible voice, he now prowled the room anxiously, like a caged animal.

He found closets, and in them a variety of wardrobes, male and female. He prevailed upon Shannara to don a simple costume—a blouse and skirt—because in her nakedness she seemed to cower. But although she accepted his reasons, she put on the clothes in order to cover her now-ugly body.

"We must escape," Elron said, moving about aimlessly, nervously. "They will return sooner or later. We can do nothing against them here or now."

"We can do nothing, period," Shannara replied dully. "For what use shall we escape?"

"For our lives!" he said angrily. "Do you think they'd let me live—or you either—for much longer?"

"Does it matter?"

For a moment she thought he would strike her, but he lowered his hand and stared at it as if in disbelief in himself. "Does it matter?" he echoed. "Does it *not* mat-

ter?" He turned on his heel and began pacing again. "We have not achieved what we came here for; we have only embroiled ourselves deeper. Do you think I will sacrifice my revenge?" he cried.

"Revenge?"

"Look what they have done to you! They have broken your spirit like that of a wildebeest from the forest!"

She laughed humorlessly. "Dear Elron. Still charging about righting wrongs, avenging maidens' honor . . ."

He grabbed her by her arm and pulled her to her feet. "Nonetheless," he said, his teeth gritted, "we shall escape!"

By late afternoon, the fog was so thick upon the air that already it felt like dusk. Elron stepped up onto the sill of one of the windows and looked down. The drop was straight to the plaza below: a matter of three stories. The wall was smooth; there were no vines. Ah, well; he hadn't expected any.

But no one was in sight on the streets—that was the important thing. There had been few sounds of traffic all afternoon. It was as though the people shunned the open and remained hidden within their houses.

He jumped back into the room. "How goes it?" he asked.

Shannara gestured at the pile on the floor beside her. "I've about done them all now." Her tone was apathetic.

The pile was a multicolored rope, braided of thick strips of sheets and blankets from the two beds. It had appeared their most obvious choice.

Elron had debated waiting till dark, but every minute they remained increases their chances of being caught. Even now his blood hammered urgently to be done with it, to escape *now, right now!*

He dragged one heavy bed across the room, bunching the rugs on the floor before it. When it was close enough to the window, he tied one end of the braided rope to it and threw the other out the window. It appeared to reach within feet of the ground.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

Shannara climbed to her feet and joined him. "I'll go

first," he said. "You follow. If anything happens, I'll catch you."

"You already have," she remarked enigmatically.

It went without hitch until he was some ten feet from the ground, and Shannara was only a few feet above him. Then suddenly, with a tearing noise, the makeshift rope broke.

He landed on his back, and Shannara's impact as she fell upon his chest knocked the breath out of him. His head cracked against the paving stones, and for a brief dizzying moment he thought he would black out. But then he was on his feet, leaning on Shannara's arm, hustling down the street, his eyes refusing to focus themselves upon the buildings ahead.

Shannara led him down the closest street, then into a narrower one, and thence to the first alley, where she stopped.

"Where are we?" she asked. "How do we get out?"

Elron shook his head. "I—I can't see. I don't know—where we are, I mean. We've got to get to the gate—to the stables, rather. Got to have mounts." Blackness pressed in on him for a moment; then he found himself on a doorstep, Shannara anxiously beside him. "The stables," he said again.

"Which way?" Shannara asked.

He tried to think. "West. West of here."

"I can't see the sun. Which way is west?"

"Where are we?"

"I told you: I don't know!"

"Gotta find out where we are," he muttered.

There were no true street signs, but shops usually included the street name on their signboards. Elron staggered back to the last street and surveyed it, blinking.

"I—I can't quite make it out. What does the shop sign say?"

"It says 'The Red Mule—Tanners and Bootwrights.'"

"Uhmm. No street name?"

"No. But there seems to be a number of leather workers along here. The place stinks of tanning."

"Really? I don't smell anything."

"There's so sense arguing about it," she said. "Do you know where you are yet?"

"You say it smells of tanning?" he repeated.

"I won't argue the point."

"No, if you do, it means we're in the southern quarter. There's a leather district not far south of the Duke's plaza. We came from that direction?" He gestured. "Then west is that way." He pointed again.

"Elron, your thoughts are confused. Are you sure?"

He reached behind his head and touched the swollen spot. His face went white, and he leaned heavily upon her.

His next clear memory was of being led down a twisting street and saying, "Why, this is the Street of Joy. We don't want to go this way!" They were heading away from the gate.

Shannara asked him questions, questions he could not remember later, and then with a shrug turned about and led him in the opposite direction.

Then they were standing under the eaves of a low building from which came the clear odor of fresh hay and stabled beasts. Night had fallen, but the lights of the gate shone brightly at the far end of the wide street.

"We're here," he said, in tones of wonder.

"Are—are you all right?" Shannara asked.

"All right?"

"You seem yourself again."

"You brought me here?"

"It wasn't easy. You babbled like a drunk. I had to steer you. And every so often I had to pry directions from you. But I guess it was a good thing: a troop of soldiers or something marched right by. They thought you were a drunk and I was your joy girl."

"I'm amazed you got us here."

"I couldn't have done it without you. I had to badger you, but every so often a place-memory would pop up in your mind, and I could use it. But"—she shrugged—"this is it; end of the line. What do we do now? That's a company of soldiers down there by the gate, in case your eyesight is still bad."

"No, I see them fine. Did they see us?"

"I don't think so. These aren't the same ones."

"Good. Let's steal our mounts."

They were saddling two sturdy-looking beasts, Elron taking the lead and Shannara following his thoughts as he did it, when the stabler poked his nose into their stall.

"Here, now! Who're ye to be stealing my beasts?"

"Stand aside, man," Elron said. "I'm Elron, a noble of the Dukes. I'm taking these beasts."

"Eh? How's you say?"

Elron swung up into saddle. "You heard me, old man. Make way, now."

The man dodged back as Elron turned his beast and walked it to the stable entrance, Shannara following.

"Are you sure?" he was still asking, as they rode out into the night.

"What about the men at the gate?" Shannara asked, as she pulled abreast.

"Leave them to me," Elron muttered.

He had no plan but that of bluster, but it seemed likely that unless the alarm was already out for them they'd encounter no trouble. One thing about a cowed populace: it didn't cause trouble. And these men would expect none.

None of the men had familiar faces Hogun was not among them. That much he could be thankful for.

They seemed a listless lot, not joking or arguing or game-playing among themselves, but simply standing and sitting about in attitudes or bored resignation. Even their challenge, when it came, was without force.

A man separated himself from the others and asked their business. Elron replied that it was the Dukes' business—surely no lie, in its own way—and the man fell back immediately, his expression incurious.

None of them turned to watch Elron and Shannara ride out through the gate.

Hard riding brought them to a quiet glen. Here, in the moonlight, they climbed from their steeds and stretched tiredly upon the grass.

Elron tried to take Shannara into his arms, but she resisted him, saying, "No, not now."

"What do you mean, not now?"

"Elron, I am a used creature, soiled and despoiled. I cannot lie with you and be a happy honeymooner any longer."

Elron shook his head. "You are my wife."

"I was your lover."

"My wife. Our bond—our pledge—they were marriage. Our wedding procession was one through hell. We fought together for our very lives. You are my wife."

"Very well. Have me, then." Her tone was resigned.

"No. Not as a piece of baggage. As Shannara, the proud Sorceress—as *my* Shannara."

"Elron, I was not a virgin when I met you; you knew that. But I came to you a virgin in mind, if not in body. I was a virgin to love. It was something very sweet, very clean and beautiful I found with you.

"But they took that away, Elron. I let them strip me of it. They must have known what they were doing; they are masters of evil. They did not need my body. They'd had their own bedmates earlier—it was those we killed. No, they did to me what they did to hurt me—to destroy me, or at least that part of me you loved.

"I am not that Shannara any more, Elron. I cannot be!" Her voice broke and dissolved into sobbing.

Elron seized her and held her close to him, and her head fell against his chest, and her tears soaked through his tunic, her body wracked with sobs.

He stroked her long hair, combing it with his fingers, back from her temples. He murmured to her. "No, Shannara; you are still the one I love, the one I shall always love. Look into my mind and see it there."

She choked a low answer. "You love me in ignorance; you love a me who does not exist."

But he continued, speaking in a low, confident tone, telling her that she would forget, in time, that her scars would heal, that she would be able to accept his love again someday, and that he would wait, would always wait for her.

And in time, the heaving of her chest subsided, her

tears dried, and she fell into a sleep, still in his arms. And rather than chance wakening her, he held her thus. His own arms were already half-asleep, but that did not bother him.

He held her, and he pondered their future and what she'd said.

They'd done something to her, and now the terrible scene leaped back into his consciousness, and his arms tightened involuntarily. He closed his eyes and looked again upon the two Others, obscenely naked, raping his wife upon their bed, and the sharp memory twisted in his guts like a ragged knife.

They'd not lacked for women: they'd done it to hurt her. *Why?* An animal snarl pulled at his lips. If only he'd done them in then!

But that was his own terrible burden of guilt: he had been able to do nothing. He had watched this terrible thing, and he had done nothing.

He thought about the situation in which they found themselves now, and a moment's irony reflected itself. *The last time they had made love—upon the far riverbank: would it indeed be their last time?* But that served only to twist the knife with self-pity.

In time—he believed this—in time, Shannara would heal. It would be a slow process, and perhaps difficult. They might never know the same easy joyousness again. But she would heal. Of that much he was certain.

But of the rest?

They had failed.

They had escaped with their lives, but ignominiously. They had escaped in stealth, and without honor.

What had he been thinking of? Why had he not remained, in that very room, to attack them upon their return? They had left him for dead and had not even taken his sword. Given the advantage of surprise . . .

But he doubted it, he doubted it as much as ever, now. They had thought that advantage theirs before, and to what avail?

Return to the thought, then: they had failed. They had

set out upon a noble venture—a necessary, if futile one. They had not accomplished it. They had done what they had to do, and it had not been enough.

With such black thoughts as these, Elron fell finally into troubled sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

SHANNARA dreamed strange and feverish dreams. She dreamed herself back in Paraganat, a scientech, white-robed and vestally virginal, a priestess of science.

She wore nothing under her robe, and a ring of heavy iron had been passed through her labia majora. An iron chain was fastened to this ring, holding her fast to her post. A pasty-faced fat man would come, unfasten the other end of the chain, and lead her hither and yon, sometimes before great crowds of people, where he would lift her robes and publicly take her in an unnatural fashion.

She felt a great and burning shame—shame that told her she could never be normal again, never know normal love again. She was now a toy, dirty and degraded, fit company only for such as these who possessed her. Her body ached and burned.

Through her dreams, they led her: the obscene and evil fat man and his companion, the silent giant. Once she had cursed them both and then asked brokenly, "Why do you never speak, Archer?" And he had of course not replied.

But a time came when she saw, on the edge of the crowd that gathered to watch her public humiliation, a tall black-bearded man, oddly out of place among the soft, degenerate people who surrounded her.

She called out to him and then clapped her hand over her mouth, for she did not want him to see her thus, and she could only watch the black sounds of her cry spread out like ripples in the water of the crowd until they touched him, and he looked up.

Their eyes locked, and she saw herself reflected through his eyes, and he said, so softly only she could hear, "You're beautiful."

But she had shaken her head and denied it, and the movement of her body had jangled her chain, and she was fearfully ashamed. She hid her face behind her hands, and then looked up.

His broad back was disappearing.

"No!" she cried, and she did something she had not done before. She reached down and took her chain and yanked it free of Edwards's hands and ran after the tall stranger, pushing against the packed bodies of the crowd.

Then she was plowing through soft sand, a great burning heat surrounding her, the man in the red tunic far ahead of her, only a bobbing speck among the dunes.

Edwards's face shone down upon her like heavenly fire, and she could run no longer. She fell, and her heavy chain dragged her to the ground, her robe high over her naked hips.

Then she was running down a long steel corridor, the brushed surfaces of metal reflecting her image dully in countless repetitions. She was trying to find something, to reach a certain door, but every door she opened led only to another gleaming, featureless corridor. There seemed no end to the corridors and the running, but at last she fell in a heap before a door, and on it were indecipherable words, but words that meant that what she sought lay just beyond. The door was locked, with a combination lock. She thought she ought to know its formula, but it would not come to her, and she turned the dial first one way and then the other, without result.

She cried out in anger and frustration, and then began beating her fists against the door. As she battered at it, its surface turned from polished chromium to a heavy, rubbery subtance, and then—

"Shannara! Wake up!"

She was lying against Elron's chest, pummeling him with her fists. He had his hands on her wrists now and was holding her, saying, "Shannara, darling, wake. You are only dreaming. Wake up."

The sky was gray where thin patches of it showed through the branches of the trees. The light in the small glade was yet dim.

"Is it morning?" she asked in a little voice.

"Yes, and it looks to be a gloomy one, as well," Elron answered. "Perhaps rain."

"I—I was having nightmares." She all but reached to explore herself to be certain it had been only a bad dream. The feel of the iron chain still lingered, and with it twin feelings of horror and hope.

It was the latter feeling she chose to explore.

"I dreamed I was a girl in Paraganat," she said. Elron helped her to her feet. "A lot of other things were mixed up in it, but that still seems important, somehow."

"Memories of childhood and innocence?"

"No, not really. There was a feeling, particularly at the end: something I was searching for. I kept running through doors and down long halls, and finally when I came to the right door, it was locked and I could not open it."

"And what does that mean to you?"

"It could mean many things. It could be the search of my own memories and a vital secret locked away. Or it could represent my search for lost virtues. Or . . . I don't know what. But it seemed so important to find it, whatever it was. It seemed as though I needed it now. I seemed to know that I was really coming back here and that it related to my present needs. I felt a great hope for it—I remember that."

"I don't understand. Perhaps it was just the dreaming of a troubled mind."

Shannara shook her head, then changed the subject. "What will we do now?"

"I had not given that great thought. Yesterday my wits were a little addled; I wanted only for us to escape. Now . .

"Perhaps, since we have come this way, we should return to the hidden ruins of Tanakor. We could use the portal there to return to Zominor. And I left some gear there—a gun, among other things. We left Qar without our provisions."

"No, not Zominor," Shannara said. "I do not wish to return there, ever again. But Tanakor, and your things—yes."

"But Hagendorf—the people there . . . they expect you. They await your return."

"I could never return. I am not the person I was then. I could never go back to that sort of life—not in any case, not even a week ago. And never through a portal."

"But this one works. I used it myself."

"No, never. I trust them not. Don't ask me again."

The day did not lighten greatly as they returned to the road and set their beasts to trotting down it. The sky remained overcast and gloomy, and the path was covered with the early-fallen leaves of autumn, reddish brown and pale gold, hollow pools of sunshine. The breeze carried the hint of chill and damp to it, occasionally scurrying crisp leaves over the road ahead of them and once causing Elron's lead beast to shy nervously.

There was no traffic along the road and no sign of any recent passage: neither wheel-ruts nor fresh spoor of wildebeest. Common campsites, when they passed them, were high with weeds and showed no signs of recent use, no charred areas from cooking fires. It was as though all trade with City Qar in this direction had stopped.

Toward dusk, they reached the ruins of Tanakor. Elron helped Shannara to dismount and led her in along the path he'd followed before among the hillocks of overgrown ruins.

"How sad," Shannara said, her voice soft. "Vagar was bad enough. But this! I have been in Tanakor more than once. And here I see nothing familiar. All is gone."

"Not quite," Elron said, ducking into the hole that formed the entrance to the underground hall and rooms

where he had left his saddle, bridle, saddlebags, and gun. Shannara waited while he retrieved them.

As he changed saddles on the beast, Shannara suddenly spoke. "Have you ever been to Paraganat? Do you suppose we could get there from here?"

Elron glanced back at the dark hole in the ground. "Not by transmitter—overland, I mean. Overland and over sea, that is."

"Where *is* Paraganat?"

"Well, it is to the west. One goes west to the open sea, then farther west, by boat. When one next comes to land, one sails around its southern tip, and northward along its western coast. And then, there is Paraganat."

"It sounds a difficult journey—more difficult even than our last. What lies in Paraganat?"

"Of that I am not certain. Yet I feel that once I am there . . ."

"*What?* You wish to undertake a great journey just to be in the place of which you dreamed?"

"Elron, I am certain that it is important, that I was trying to remember something."

He shrugged. "What can be worth so much to remember?"

"Have you better plans?" Her voice was tart.

"But—a *dream!*"

"What of your dreams?" she asked sarcastically.

"That is a cruel thing to say. You know of the fate of my dreams. We have abandoned all but one."

"Then humor me, and perhaps none shall be lost."

"What is Paraganat, anyway?"

"It was once the scientific center of the world, the place where they researched and developed all the great machines and devices that to you are simply magic."

"Ah! And would any of this—call it 'magic' then—does any of this magic still remain?"

"Of that I could not say. In any case, it cannot hurt to look and see."

With the spring gun, Elron hunted and shot game, and their meal that night, taken prudently far from the road,

was one that refilled their empty stomachs. Shannara had found some late-ripening fruit, which Elron assured her was good to eat, and had slit the large muney before roasting it, inserting slices of the fruit into the cuts to cook with the meat. It made a delicious meal, one Elron praised her for. But Shannara said little as they ate, and when they lay down together she seemed distant to Elron, with an emotional distance no amount of coaxing could bridge.

For her part, Shannara was aware of the hurt in Elron's heart, but she could not deal with it. She felt herself an island, self-contained within a shell of pain. It blanketed her ability to be tele-empathic, and this only added to her feelings of inadequacy. She dreaded sleep and the terrible dreams she feared would come, but mingled with her fear was a tingling of anticipation: could she unlock that door tonight?

They settled into a routine during the next few days. They rode along the empty road, pausing for hunting and for meals, easily found in this abundantly stocked forest, and spoke increasingly less to each other. When they did speak, their conversation was short and related directly to the task at hand, to a choice of campsite or to the fixing of the day's game. Elron felt old and tired, the fire that had propelled him along their journey from Vagar now extinguished.

They had been going *toward* a goal then; now they fled it. He had been engrossed in his love for Shannara then; now it seemed a futile thing, a millstone about his neck, dragging him deeper into despondency every time he chanced to look at her. He would glance her way, when they were riding or when about their impromptu camps, and he might admire the fluid grace of her body and the supple way she had adapted to riding, or perhaps only the soft curve of her cheek in the firelight; but whatever it was, his heart would do a quick leap, and then he would feel an ache spread through him. This had been his and was his no longer: that was what the sight of her said to him.

He had thought at first that a night in his arms, the closeness and comfort of him, would be sufficient to win her back. He had filled his thoughts with sunshine and love, with memories of happier times together, with nostalgia even, for those many long days they'd spent crossing the desert, the mountains, and the remaining countryside to Qar. Had he only realized the value of those moments then . . . ? But then he had thought them only a prelude, a foretaste of a long life that stretched out ahead of them both.

Warm thoughts, loving thoughts had accomplished nothing. It was as though a shield separated his thoughts from hers. At first distressed, she had soon withdrawn into a moody silence, broken now only infrequently, and then quite often with sharp-toned disagreements. The closeness was gone.

They did not sleep so closely now. They shared the same blankets—of necessity, it would appear, and little more—but without touching. At times he would awaken to hear her cry out in her sleep, but the single time he had tried to take her into his arms to comfort her, she had turned away and demanded that he let her sleep.

He felt a deep bitterness spreading through him, the wine of love gone sour in his belly, the acid eating at him. He was a proud man humbled and without the means or the knowledge to cope. He looked covertly at her, and the old feelings would leap and die, curdling in his fresh awareness of their futility.

It was not a happy trip.

Rain threatened for days but did not come. The days were gloomy, each blending grayly into the next. The greens of the forest were darkening as fall took hold, and here and there a sapling already stood denuded, bleak and cheerless. It was all too obviously reflective of his own mood, Elron thought.

The road lifted and wound its way through hills. Mountains lay ahead, but these were old, worn mountains, heavily forested, and the pass the road followed was a low one.

The days were clammy, the nights chill. Elron welcomed each fire and was grateful for the blankets they slept in. But his heart seemed as chilled as the land, and he rode through each day in a more complete and stony silence, cutting himself from his own thoughts and the pain and anguish they held, preferring to feel nothing at all.

Then, a week after they had set out, and now well in the foothills of the mountains, the rain came. It seemed at first as though the clouds were simply getting lower, and then he could no longer see the mountains ahead. Then the rain fell. It was light, steady rain that grew heavy at times and at others slacked almost to a drizzle, but never stopped. It drove against them, and it quickly penetrated their clothes, wetting them to the skin. That night he stretched one soggy blanket over the sodden leaves on the ground and made a tent of the second, facing its opening to the fire he had finally brought ablaze. The overhead blanket kept off the worst of the rain, and even began to steam in the heat of the fire, but they still slept more poorly than usual that night. Elron awoke once to find himself cold, wet, and shivering, the fire outside only hissing embers. He rebuilt it, then crawled close against Shannara, seeking her body heat. But he did not put his arms around her.

The rain lasted two more miserable days as they rode the now straight road through the mountains. Shannara remarked once that she thought it was the original road, but Elron only grunted, and she did not elaborate. The only sound was the hooves of the beasts, squishing through the mud, and the steady patter of the rain on the leaves of the surrounding trees.

That final night they went without a fire, eating cold meat cooked the night before. It was heavy with coagulated grease and tasted gamy, and Elron ate little. He was not very hungry these days. The absence of sufficiently dry wood could not annoy him, nor could the subsequent cold meal and cold bed; he endured. He was stoic—no more. And he slept very little.

But when he awoke the next morning, it was to the

absence of the monotonous tattoo of rain. The sky was blue to the west, and there was a hint of sunshine coming. It would be a good thing, too. The air had turned colder, as well as drier. His leathers seemed like cold and clammy fingers against him, and it seemed an eternity since last he'd known dry warmth.

He got up without disturbing Shannara and puttered around the camp, caring for the two tethered beasts and stowing their few necessities away. A pale sunlight had cast thin shadows before Shannara crawled bedraggled from the makeshift tent to stare around her incuriously and stretch.

As he watched her, he stared wonderingly. This woman was all but a stranger to him. What relation did she bear to the Shannara he'd known and loved so intimately?

She turned and disappeared into the bushes. It was another sign: before, they had known no shame with each other. Morosely, he attacked the blankets, shaking loose leaves free as best he could, then folding them.

The sun was at their backs when they rode down into Ulloro.

This was another of the Great Cities now fallen into ruin. A seaport city to the east of the mountains and built upon the bay, it had once shared with Banarajan, across the bay, the major western trade of the continent. A kind of rivalry had once flourished between the two cities, for although they were not greatly separated, their peoples were of two different kinds. The inhabitants of Ulloro, in common with all the people of the north, were tall, taciturn people, dark of hair but pale of skin. Their neighbors to the south were shorter as a rule, chunkier, and of darker complexion. The people of the south had been a lively sort, full of the traditions of song and dance, and entirely too merry-making for the northerners to abide cheerfully.

But these were peoples long gone, and the few survivors alive today were rarely true to these exaggerated types. Those who'd survived had formed tiny familylike units at

the beginning, and genetic drift had acted swiftly upon their unstable groups. Many bloodlines had perished within the first thousand years, too inbred to survive. But others had sought different groups out, made it a crime to marry within one's own unit, and encouraged sufficient cross-marriage to keep bloodlines healthy. In the process, of course, old prejudices were forgotten. A short, swarthy man would be prized by a unit of tall, pale-skinned people: a blond would be welcomed among brunets. Difference counted, but as an asset.

In this fumbling fashion trade began again, and the race was stabilized. But as units spread and grew, old jealousies reasserted themselves. Property became important again, and lands were guarded.

When Elron and Shannara rode down the weed-grown street into Ulloro, they were stopped by a challenge.

"Stop where you are, folks. Just drop your reins and slide off. We got plenty spring guns pointed your way."

The voice came from inside a low, crumbling building to their left. Elron debated the point but not heatedly. He nodded at Shannara, then dismounted. "What do you want?" he called.

A face poked through an opening choked with vines; then a man stepped through. He was a short, wiry-looking man, with a flaming shock of red hair. He held a functional-appearing spring gun cradled in his arms. It pointed vaguely in their direction.

"Well, now, I guess that just depends," he replied. He sized up Elron's haggard, travel-worn appearance, then transferred his attention to Shannara. His gaze was full and openly assessing. Once, Elron might have felt stirred to protest. Now he was just tired.

"Where might you folks be bound?" the redhead asked.

"Waterfront," Elron said shortly.

"The waterfront, eh? The piers, wharves, boats, all that sort of thing?" The man laughed. "'Fraid not. Whatcha got in those saddlebags?"

"Not much," Elron said truthfully. The man was little more than a highwayman, it seemed, who lay in wait for passing victims. He wondered how many others the man

had to back him up—his story might be as full of holes as the ruins that surrounded them.

"Well, we'll check on that," the man said, moving confidently closer. He let his gaze slide back over Shannara again. "You've got *something* of value, anyway, friend." He laughed warmly. "You might be able to buy something with her."

The man went first to the saddlebags of Shannara's beast, and found them empty. He clucked his tongue. "What would you be wanting at the waterfront, fella?" he asked as he came around Elron's beast.

"A boat."

"Ah, a boat!" He disgustedly rifled the bags on Elron's beast with hardly better results. "And what would you pay for it with?"

"With whatever is necessary," Shannara said, speaking for the first time. Her voice was cold and hard. She sounded not at all like the woman Elron had once known.

The redheaded man laughed again. "But you can't," he said delightedly.

Elron felt his muscles tensing.

"Can't?"

"You'll have nothing of value." He approached Shannara again. "I'm taking it all."

Elron wondered if he was being goaded, being dared to try a play. It was an old game, and one known by many names. "Rob Him and Beat Him" was as good a name as any. For robbers it was a sport: they toyed with the victim, dangling various futile hopes before his eyes, the principle hope being simply life. In the end, having taken and destroyed all the others, they usually took that as well.

If that was the man's game, it was hardly necessary to play it all out. Elron had lost so much already that he no longer held his own life dear. There was not much more to lose, however one sliced it.

Silently, he drew his sword and brought it down with both hands in a slashing sweep against the redhead's neck and shoulder. The man had but breath for a single cry before he was beheaded.

Elron felt a vicious satisfaction in wielding the sword

so brutally. All his pent-up frustrations of the last days had gone into that blow. The shock that traveled up his arms as his blade struck bone was as gratifying as the solid bite of it into the meat of the man's shoulder.

Hanging by only a flap of skin, the man's head flopped back over his shoulder, dangling down his back, his face unside-down and its expression wide-eyed and gape-mouthed, red hair hanging down and brightened with blood.

The blood came in great spurts from the stump of the figure's neck, while it staggered forward, legs working spasmodically, gun still cradled in one arm.

The dead man's legs still kicked after his body had toppled to the ground.

Chapter Fifteen

Elron did not wait to see the man fall. Giving a shout to Shannara, he vaulted onto his beast's back and threw it into a hard gallop down the street, Shannara just behind him.

For a moment he thought that they had succeeded, that the man had been running a bluff and alone.

Then an outraged cry rang out, and a gun-bolt shot by, so close that he felt the vibrations of its passage by his ear.

Others struck the street beyond—but one did not. A piercing pain hit his right shoulder, and he fell forward with a lurch, the blow almost knocking him from his steed.

His right arm was paralyzed; he grabbed first saddle, then reins with his left hand, steadying himself. A pool of flame was spreading across his shoulder.

They were at a full gallop and soon out of gun range. He waited until they had crested a small rise, then swung hard against his mount, turning it into a narrower side street, and inspected the surroundings. They looked unused. He turned the beast into the black opening of a door, leaning low to duck through it.

The room was dank and smelled only of mildew. He heard Shannara's beast clop in after him, and he started to dismount.

His right arm would not work. He began to lose his balance, and his right arm did not work. He grabbed with his left, but the red throbbing of his shoulder had spread to his brain, and he could no longer be sure whether he was holding anything with his hand.

He had just decided that he was standing safely on the ground, when he hit it.

He awoke in a feverish stage. He was lying on blankets in a dark room. He turned his head and saw, through an archway, a fire. A shadow stooped over it, then moved, suddenly blocking the sight of it. Then she was stooping over him, holding a cup of broth to his lips. Her arm slipped under him and helped him raise his head, and her hand holding the cup was steady.

He drank the broth gratefully, the taste impossibly rich and full, savoring it to its last drop with his tongue.

She let him back down again, and his right shoulder throbbed. He groaned involuntarily.

The figure over him murmured soothing words—and her voice cut through his mental fog.

He reached out suddenly, quickly, with his left hand, and seized her wrist. "You—*you are not Shannara!*"

The girl twisted in his grip, and for the first time light fell upon her face.

It was a narrow face with wide-set eyes, framed by shoulder-length blond hair. Her eyes were light gray or

perhaps, in better light, blue. She was a slight thing, and suddenly quite young.

"Let me go!" she cried.

He released her. "Where is Shannara?" he asked thickly. "Who are you? Where is this?"

She moved back a little way from him, and the light from the fire silhouetted her, outlining the simple dress she wore and her small breasts, which heaved as she regained her breath.

"I am Tita, and I am going with you," she said.

"Going with me? Where?"

"Across the great sea. With you and your lady."

Elron tried to see her better. The room was growing dark. "Where. . . . ?" he started to ask. Then the fever washed unconsciousness over him again.

He awoke to feel cool air against his face, and an animal moving under him. He was mounted on a beast, and the clop of hooves echoed loudly from all about.

Someone was sitting behind him, arms passed about him, holding the reins.

He opened his eyes and saw only darkness. Then he saw that they were crossing a patch of moonlight, and he was staring between the tall horns of his beast.

Another beast followed them. His memories seemed fleeting, and he had difficulty remembering where he was, what had brought him here. He had vague feelings that he had spoken to a young girl, but perhaps that was the product of delirium.

Ahead, in the fuzzy distance, light glinted off water, glistening here and there as the water moved and rippled. They seemed to be riding down a hill.

Then they were near the foot of the street, and water was slapping against the sides of buildings. The beast stopped.

"Elron?" It was Shannara's voice. His heart leaped. It sounded as it had of old. "Elron? Help us, please. We must get you down. Can you stand? Can you help?"

Two pairs of hands seemed to assist him in dismounting,

and he was supported on both sides as they led him into the darkness of a nearby doorway.

There were water sounds here, inside the building, as well. The place stank of sourly of dead sea life and damp and mildew. They led him over a floor long littered with debris and then onto a floor that dipped under them. He stumbled, and they eased him to a sitting position. He fell forward, over his knees, unconscious again.

He came to, only to be violently sick. He was being tossed and rolled, and with every heave, his stomach rebelled. He was in a small boat, upon the open sea.

The boat was made of metal, twin-hulled, with a flat deck, sails, and a small cabin. He was lying in his blankets in the cabin.

The sounds of his retching brought both Shannara and Tita into the cabin. Tita returned to her watch, while Shannara explained to him.

She had dug out the bolt from his shoulder, but it had not been a clean job. He had caught a bad fever. Anxious, she had slipped out to try to find help.

She did not go into details, but it appeared that Ulloro was populated by roving groups of scavengers, hostile to each other and regarding all newcomers as fair prey. Elron inferred she had been driven to use force to escape from at least one person or group.

She had found the city half underwater. There were few boats to be found, and those jealously guarded. But then a young girl, Tita—she was only fourteen—had come to her and said that she would help her take a boat, if they would take her away with them. She had been bartered to a man whom she detested, and he had a boat. . . .

They stole the boat and hid it in one of the half-drowned buildings along the waterline. Then they took Elron there in the dead of night and made their stealthy escape. They had not been followed. They had sailed west, following the coast as long as they could, before striking out into open ocean. They had been at sea now for three days. The wind was from the east, and a stiff one; indeed,

they used only partial sails and yet scudded along easily.

"This boat. . . ?" Elron had asked.

"It is very old: a pleasure craft for sailing upon the bay, I think," Shannara replied.

"And yet you trust it?"

"We have no choice. But the boat is sound—it was well made of noncorroding metal—and if the seas do not grow rougher . . ."

Elron scowled. "Does it always make these motions?"

Shannara laughed, a silver peal of bells. "Haven't you been in a boat before?"

"Only the ferry across the River Qar," he replied grumpily.

"You'll learn—you'll get used to it."

"That, or remain sick," he said.

"Let me see your shoulder."

She inspected the wound. Its swelling was done, and the skin was no longer an angry scarlet. It appeared to be healing.

"What of this Tita?" Elron asked, with a nod to the deck.

"She is a good girl. She helped me with you when you were in a high fever. Without her help, we would still be in that miserable thieves' city."

"Shannara . . ." He looked up into her face.

She smiled. "I'm back, Elron." She bent and touched her lips lightly to his.

He fell asleep again, but this time a natural sleep, rocked by the waves, Shannara's hand tightly gripped in his own.

They ate fish, and in time Elron was sitting up, dressed again, even moving about a little on the boat. Tita avoided him, averting her eyes whenever he glanced at her, but he hardly noticed, for his waking hours were taken up with Shannara, for whom his love was reawakening.

For Shannara, it had been the sight of Elron, fallen, the black butt of the bolt protruding from his shoulder, his leathers soaked with blood. The bolt, driven by a heavy spring at close range, had pierced both his leather tunic and his light chain mail, penetrating inches into his shoulder.

She had stared at it and felt a horror sweep over her: the horror of loneliness, of loss. This had been her man, her mate, her protector. He had come this way on what had seemed to him a fool's mission, to humor a woman who would no longer respond to him, and he had taken the bolt in the act of rescuing her. She had been resigned, little caring what fate befell her, as willing to be taken for booty as anything else. Her feelings had been progressively deadened as she had closed herself off from Elron and the world, aware that she was hurting him, but more aware of her own aching emptiness. She felt herself reduced to the status of Object, to be handled as the whims of fate might dictate.

Then, just as the red-haired man had started for her, Elron had struck, striking in the face of almost certain retaliatory death, but striking nonetheless. She had glimpsed, startled, the death-certainty in his own mind, and his own resignation. But yet he had vaulted onto his beast, and she had followed him in that wild gallop to escape.

They had hit him, and he was fortunate that the bolt had done no more than wound. At first it was the shock: then fever overtook him, while she ministered to him what little she could, helpless before the hand of fate, fearful of her loss.

It had jarred her free from her self-pity; it had made real the extent of Elron's value to her. She saw with shocked, fresh eyes the fool she had made of herself and the way she had driven him from her. She had been so wrapped in her own anguish, her own violation, for so long that she had forgotten how much more important this man was to her. Many days lay between her and her rape in City Qar now: insulating days that took away the feel of those gross and sweating bodies, the pain and indignity of the physical acts they had forced upon her. And now she could realize, had to realize, that if they had raped her spirit as well, it was only because she had let them. And this much, at least, she had the power to nullify.

If the experience in Qar was a nightmare gone stale, Elron lying close by in a high fever was horror quite real

and immediate. He still might die—and in that she would truly lose all that she treasured.

She had knelt before him and whispered to him then, in an attitude of prayer. "Elron," she'd breathed, "dearest Elron. Don't slip away, please. Fight against it, struggle to mend. I love you, Elron. I am stupid and foolish, but I love you. Please don't leave me. Please don't die!"

He had given no sign of hearing her, but she had felt better, purged of her guilt. And that night when she dreamed, as she had so many times before, of the steel corridors of Paraganat, she found the door unlocked, and she read and understood the legend on its face.

And when she awoke, she knew that now, more than ever, it was imperative that they reach Paraganat.

The Northern Continent was shaped a little like a hook, its easternmost portion cutting out into the open ocean and then hooking down, to form a vast inlet, a sea in itself, between the eastern arm and the main body of the continent.

They sailed around that arm and cut in along its western coast to follow it northward.

Their first sight of land was of white-tipped mountains on the horizon, and Tita saw them first. Elron was sleeping, but Tita's happy cry brought him awake and onto the small deck. The sun was directly overhead, the sea gently rolling, its surface almost oily-looking, a dark blue. There was a stiff breeze, but in the sunlight it was warm enough.

They sailed for the southern tip of the mountains, past high cliffs, the palisades that marked the abrupt ending of the sheer mountains.

It grew colder as they sailed north, although the coast flattened out, the mountains receding into the interior. They saw few trees in these coastal hills, mostly a heavy blue-green grass. Shannara said that the grass grew in a thick sod over a thin layer of topsoil. The countryside was bleak, but beautiful after its own fashion. Paraganat was on a small river at the base of the mountains, some way inland from the coast. Three thousand years ago, win-

ter had lasted most of the year here, and the mountains had been perpetually white. She had never seen them so naked before, or grass still growing this late in the year.

Originally a scientific outpost set up to study the movement of the glaciers, the city had eventually harnessed the power of the glaciers, and the predominantly scientific community had developed into an enclave of scientists and scholars. The land had been beautiful then, the richly frosted slopes of the nearby mountains made for sport, the seafood varied and nourishing, and, with greenhouses, even fresh vegetables had been possible the year round.

The city itself, Shannara told them, had been an interconnected set of complexes—malls and walkways roofed over with glass that let through the sunlight but protected them from the cold and the elements. It had been a beautiful city, she said—in her opinion, the most beautiful in all Qanar. Elron could accept her description because he had seen the living City Zominor. Tita remained unbelieving.

The first evening after starting up the coast they turned the boat into a sheltered cove bounded by high cliff walls and made anchor. It would be their first night since setting out that watch would not be kept on deck. All of them could get a good night's sleep.

There were no bunks in the small cabin—the boat had not been intended for sleeping in—but they spread the blankets out. Now Elron found himself lying next to Shannara, with a nervous Tita lying beyond her. It embarrassed him; they had not had many moments of privacy together, and he had had only a few brief kisses from Shannara to signal her change of heart. He wanted her; he needed the opportunity to reestablish that physical rapport with her. The presence of the young girl, even out on deck standing watch, had been inhibiting. Here, it was even more so. He found himself resenting the girl. Ever since he had returned to shaky normalcy onboard the boat, he had sensed a disapproval in the girl. He had surprised her in hard, cold-eyed looks that always disappeared when he returned her gaze.

She was tall and slender, her hips still boyishly slim,

already too feminine to be called skinny, but not yet fully developed. "She has had a hard time with men," Shannara had said, and Elron remembered that the girl had been bartered and undoubtedly had been ill-used. It had not served to quench her spirit—unlike Shannara, she had apparently had little self-esteem—but only to quicken her wary eyes and make her more aloof.

Now she lay just beyond Shannara in the moonlight-streaked darkness, her breathing still too quick, remaining still when, it seemed to Elron, it would have been more natural for her to toss a little, to settle herself more comfortably into the blankets.

Elron pulled Shannara closer against him and kissed her lightly. She squeezed his hand, but her manner said, "Not now." Her breathing subsided slowly. Tita's still came quickly, short and shallow. Elron allowed himself one snort, in disgust, then let his eyes close, and his body tip over the precipice into sleep.

They slipped a short way up the river inlet before beaching the boat. The current in the river was strong, and there was not enough wind to attempt headway. They lowered the sails and brought the boat up onto a beach of pebbles, where they secured the anchor lines.

Then, loaded with their provisions, the blankets folded over their shoulders for additional warmth, they set out afoot for Paraganat.

They came upon the old man sitting on a rock. His back was to them, and he seemed to be leaning against a tall gnarled staff. His hair was white and curled out in a great mane, meeting and mingling with his full white beard. He was staring at the mountains.

"Greetings, Father," Elron said.

The man did not move.

"I said, greetings," Elron repeated, a little louder.

Without turning, the old man replied, "I heard you. My ears are not deaf."

They walked around the rock to face him. He was wear-

ing tattered but heavy robes, but his feet were bare. His legs, what they could see of them, were shaggy with white and gray hair. The man's skin was a dark brown.

"Have you no kind words for travelers, strangers to your countryside?" Elron asked.

The man's eyes flickered at them, then returned to the snowcapped peaks beyond. "I am an old man; there is nothing for you to tell me."

"Then perhaps you could instruct us," said Shannara. "Could you tell us of Paraganat?"

"Tell you what?"

"What do you know?"

"Of Paraganat? Nothing."

Both Elron and Shannara were now growing vexed with the man. "And you, an old man who knows everything?" Elron asked, his tone barely civil.

"What is there to know of this, this Paraganat?" the old man replied. "It is a word I have never heard. Therefore, it is not worth knowing, for I know all that is worth knowing."

"I doubt that," said Tita suddenly, tartly.

Elron nodded. "You are supreme in your ignorance, sir," he said, and turned his back. The two girls followed on his heels.

"Wait."

Elron paused.

"Perhaps you can tell me something after all. What is this Paraganat?"

Elron smiled. "It was the name of a great city once near here."

"Upriver?"

"Yes. Does it still stand?"

"Aye, it stands. But it be Paraganat no more. It is called Anatha, the City of Death."

"A city of death, you say?"

"One that none may enter. The lord of death, the Lord Anatha swoops down and carries off all who dare the cursed place. I am waiting here to watch it destroyed."

"You wait here for its destruction?"

Waspishly: "Did I not say that?"

"And how will it be destroyed?" Elron asked.

"Even as the Lord Anatha takes the lives of men, he will come for this his namesake, the City of Death."

"And you will see this from here."

"Aye, for the mountain will descend upon the plain, and the lord will trample the city and destroy it."

"Old man, how long have you sat here, awaiting this event?"

There was no answer. Elron and the others turned again, to continue upriver.

"Forty, maybe fifty years," came the reedy voice behind them.

Chapter Sixteen

"THE OLD MAN is quite mad," said the young man with the shoulder-length blond hair. "He lost his son and his wife to the City Anatha."

They were sitting before a comfortable fire in a well-built house of sod. It was one of perhaps two dozen in the village just below Paraganat, or Anatha, as they called it here. They had found the village only a few minutes beyond the old man and his rock, and there they had been openly welcomed by the villagers, for whom strangers were a rarity. They had been feasted, all work in the village coming to a stop for the occasion, and then plied with both questions and a fermented beverage that made the answers easy. They had told a little of their travels, and their listeners had listened with absorption.

But then the sun had dropped low, and the people had retreated into their houses for the long night. A young

man named Ell had invited them into his home; he explained that as yet he was unmarried and had the house to himself. "There are few available maidens who are also willing," he'd said with a shrug, and a wink to the girls.

Tita had asked him of the old man who sat on the rock, and now he added, "His son was but a little boy, but possessed of a curious mind. The boy set out to explore the enticements of the city. He never came back. The boy's mother followed after him. She too never returned. She was a beautiful young woman." He smiled at Shannara, as if to say, "You too, my dear." "He lacked the courage—or the foolhardiness, you might say—to go in after them, for which no one blamed him but he himself. He has sat upon that rock ever since, awaiting the destruction of the city. He believes the mountain will fall upon it and bury it all."

"But would this not mean the destruction of your village here, as well?" Elron asked.

"Of course, and he has not overlooked the point." Ell nodded. "He calculates his distance will save him."

"But how does he live?" Shannara asked.

"There are always a few—myself among them—who have pity in their hearts. We bring him food, and in the winter we kindle a fire before him and erect a shelter over him. He rarely thanks us, but without us he should be dead within days."

"Does he never leave the rock?" asked Tita.

Ell laughed. "Certainly. But he is quick of hearing, and when he hears anyone approach, he always scuttles back to his rock. Once, as a child, I approached him in great stealth. He was washing his feet at the river's edge. I crawled away and then returned openly. He was upon his rock. I asked him if he had been away from his rock a little before. He denied it quite vigorously. He feels that small boys want only to spy and pester him."

"The city," Elron said, returning to the point uppermost in his own mind. "How does it kill?"

"Demons prowl its streets," Ell replied, quite seriously.

"Don't laugh—I am not a fool on a rock. I have seen these things with my own eyes. They are the messengers of Lord Anatha, the Lord of Death. It is to them we take our dead. We lay them in the broad street, and then the demons come. It is best if one does not linger. . . ."

"Have you any idea what this might mean?" Elron asked Shannara.

"I can only guess," she said slowly, thoughtfully. "Guard devices—sentinels. We had none in my time. But that was yet a thousand years before—"

"Can we avoid them?"

"We shall have to. I have not told you before, but I know now what it is that I seek. I can only hope some trace may remain." She turned again to the open-mouthed Ell. "Do the buildings still stand upright, or are they in ruins?"

"I—I don't understand. You are going into the city? Is this a—a religious pilgrimage?"

"No. I must find something within the city. Does it stand, I ask?"

"Yes, and it points great towers of light into the heavens at night. Some believe these the ladders of the messengers of death."

"Really?" Elron got up and strolled to the door, which was a neatly fitted panel of leather stretched over bone. He opened it and stared out to the east.

There had been no sign of the city before, but Shannara had said it was a low city and had never had the high-flying towers of many of the other cities. It would not be visible from here, even if standing.

But now, as he stood in the doorway, he saw a white beam of light extending upward from beyond a nearby hill into the sky. Arms snaked around his waist, and then Shannara was peering over his shoulder. "Lights," she said. "Still lights—after all this time. . . ."

"You must not go into the city," Ell said behind them. He turned to the young Tita. "Do you wish to go to your own death?"

She shuddered. "No," she said. "I should be happy to

remain here and not set another foot outside this village."

So it was that Shannara and Elron left the village alone the next morning, Tita remaining behind to wait for them —or to mourn for them should they not return, as Ell seemed to think most likely.

A short hike brought them within sight of the city. From the hill above, it looked like a scattered set of child's building blocks, the squares and oblongs arranged in no discernible pattern, and brightly colored in reds, yellows, blues, greens, oranges, and blacks.

"It looks quite deserted and dead," Elron said, "but I observe that there is no sign of decay—nothing like the other ruined cities we have seen."

"Paraganat was always a highly automated city," Shannara said, musing. "It must have progressed much further in that direction since . . ." She pointed down at one of the oblong blocks. "Do you see that red building there? That is the one we want, if I am not mistaken. That was the Center for Parapsychological Research."

"And what do we seek there?"

"An amplifier, a physical amplifier. It is—it was, at any rate—a helmetlike device. With it, one can concretize one's mental abilities. With my tele-empathic gifts I also had a weak psychokinetic ability—I could sometimes influence games of chance. When I volunteered to help test the amplifier, it enormously magnified my abilities. Unfortunately, it was not entirely successful."

"How do you mean?" They were walking down the hillside now, the turf spongy under their feet.

"It worked while I wore it, but when I stopped using it, my abilities were even weaker than before, and for many days I suffered great migraine headaches."

"This is what you were trying to remember?"

"Yes. I don't know why it did not come to me long ago, but I had forgotten it completely. It was not until I dreamed of it that I remembered it. Now, why should that be?"

Elron had no ready explanation.

There had been a road leading from the city to the

river, perhaps across or down its banks. But that road was gone now, all but the stub end that stopped at the effective limits of the city.

It was as though a line had been drawn. Beyond that line, hundreds of years of frost and tenacious grass roots had buckled, broken, and eaten away the road. But within the borders of the city, the road, if cracked by frost, had been repaired. And if grass had crept over that line, it had been disposed of.

Shannara stared before her, eyes wide. "It is as though I had left here only yesterday! It is the same—all the same —but for the people, of course, and the bare sides of the mountains."

Elron stared sharp-eyed at the street that stretched before them, twisting past a great block of a blue building that shimmered in the sun. There was not a speck of dirt on the surface of the road.

He pulled out his sword and used it to carve a chunk of sod from the thick surf. Grasping it by the thickly bunched grass, he swung it around his head and threw it well into the city, so that it hit upon the center of the spotless road. Then he sat down to wait.

They did not have to wait long. A sudden scurry of movement appeared from around the corner of the blue building, and a tiny machine, shiny rods and wheels, gears glittering, sidled up to the earthen clod. It seemed almost to sniff; then the homeostatic mechanism extended its digits and opened an orifice. It reached out and ladled the grass, dirt, and scattered pieces into itself, swallowing them. Then it rolled back and forth over the spot until even the smear of dust was gone. Whereupon, it promptly turned tail and scooted away.

"A 'demon'?" Elron asked.

"A cleaning machine," Shannara said. "I can't believe it would attack humans. Not unless . . . unless it had been re-programed."

"You know the city. What shall we do?"

"Enter it. We'll have to lake our chances."

Elron glanced behind them, at the hill they had descended. A few people stood outlined against the sky,

watching. He turned his back and followed Shannara onto the road.

They saw no more machines as they hurried down the road into the city. If sentinels there were, they were occupied elsewhere. But Shannara had her doubts. "This city has its traps for the unwary. But I do not believe it has attacked anyone."

"But what about the dead? They bring their dead here."

"The cleaning machines—they must be able to sense the difference between life and lifelessness."

"Perhaps." But Elron remained wary.

The shops and offices, the labs and workshops were all quite tidy, glass and metal utensils sitting here and there, all completely devoid of dust.

But there were no signs of people, nor of paper or cloth or anything similar that might have deteriorated or rotted over the long years. Maintenance machines kept everything neat and orderly, removing only dirt and dust, and the dirt and dust that once might have been a necessary but deteriorated part of the equipment in this place.

Shannara poked about here and there, reorienting herself.

"What makes you think you can find it?" he asked her, as they strode down yet another stainless-steel corridor. And while she poked through the almost empty drawers of a desk, he asked, "How do you know any such amplifier still exists?"

She held up a key. "I don't. I have no idea. But I am prepared to search until I am convinced it's hopeless."

The key opened a storeroom. Here too there was no dust, but considerably more disarray. Metal boxes were stacked here and there, some fallen on their sides. Equipment of various arcane sorts was deposited in neat heaps amongst these boxes. These were the contents of boxes that had been wood or paper and that were now long gone.

"They shelved it as both unfeasible and unprofitable," Shannara said, looking about. "Unless they took it out later, for additional work, it should be here."

"Unless someone else decided he wanted it for himself and took it, you mean," Elron said. He felt skeptical of their luck—it had run badly for too long.

There were no labels on the metal boxes and cans; any they'd had were now dust. Shannara began opening boxes and then tossing them aside.

"What is it we are looking for? I mean, what does it look like?" Elron asked.

"A helmet. A thing to fit over your head and a box that straps on your back, with wires and things."

He pulled the lid off a large barrellike can. "Like this?" he asked, lifting the amplifier out.

The batteries in the powerpack were dead but still reusable. Shannara recharged them from the power socket in the lab room to which they had repaired.

Superficial examination showed the amplifier to be apparently undamaged. It would require charged batteries for testing, however. Shannara seemed increasingly uneasy as the time approached to unplug the batteries and attach them in the powerpack. Elron had no difficulty in guessing her thoughts. Like her, he was apprehensive. Cold jitters cut through his stomach. If the device were to fail now . . .

He had lost much of his belief in magic. He understood now that this, and all the "science" of the ancient world that he had feared, was simply machines, devices, ways of doing things no less naturally than those he'd known, but more sophisticated, more advanced in their requirement of knowledge. He had learned to use the magic of the energy gun expertly, and in so doing, he had lost his superstitious awe of it, learning instead that it was simply a tool, a very advanced sort of tool.

Thus, this amplifier. It was a tool, albeit an imperfect one. If it functioned, it would allow Shannara to exercise her gifts as a "Sorceress" as never she had before.

If it functioned.

Elron found himself standing in a grassy glade. A tall oak spread wide branches over the small clearing, through

which a gentle summer sun filtered down. A light breeze rustled the leaves of the trees, spreading a voiceless murmur through the great forest. He flexed his toes in the thick moss beneath the tree and sniffed the air. Its scent was laden with many smells—the musk of ferns, the perfume of wildflowers, the freshness of green growing things—all enticing, all delightful to the nose.

Again the breeze stirred, fanning lightly against his bare skin, and sunlight played in light and shadow over his tall, well-muscled body. He felt well and whole, as he had not in what seemed a long time. He felt like a wild buck, tossing his head in the breeze, testing the scents, ready to charge off into the brush at a moment's wild notion. He found himself stretching, drawing deep breaths, in instinctive anticipation.

Elron?

He looked across the glade. There, standing next to a thin sappling, dappled with sunlight, was a woman, long-legged, slender-waisted, full-breasted, black hair falling around one side of her neck, over her shoulder, and in a veil across one breast, its ruby nipple thrusting out.

Shannara!

They stood poised for a long moment; then each moved out into the sunlight, under the deep blue sky, while somewhere not far away a bird sang among the trees, and little animals skittered through the underbrush, chattering to themselves.

Shannara, my beautiful, my darling. He caressed her with his eyes.

She did not reply with words but raised her lips, her eyes half-closed. He met her lips with his own, a kiss that began as a light brushing of soft lips and then grew, as their mouths parted, tongues darted and met, and their bodies moved together.

Elron was conscious of her nipples, stiff against his chest, her belly against his own, their thighs rubbing together, while their mouths joined in a deeper, panting kiss.

His arms slid around her, one hand massaging her back and shoulderblades, while the other dipped lower, to the

small of her back, the swell of her buttocks, and their crevice. Their bodies cleaved together in movements of which neither was entirely aware.

Darling, came Shannara's voice, and he heard it even though his lips had not left hers, a voice in his mind *Dearest Elron, forgive me my sins against you—take me for your wife—take me . . .*

And he lowered her to the grass, warm in the sunshine, smelling fresh where they had bruised it, and there he took her, the sun on his back, gentle breezes skipping lightly over his skin.

He took her in love, and in passion, but most of all in forgiveness and gentleness, and in sweetness. This was a return to inoncence of a kind: a return to beauty and a mending of rent ties. He was slow and gentle, kissing her here and there, tracing filigreed patterns over her skin with his fingers, progressing carefully; arousing her passions but always remaining a little tantalizing, so that she hungered for yet more.

And when he took her, it was to the accompaniment of her long, drawn-out moan of pleasure, one that was to be followed by yet others as the tempo of their rocking bodies increased, his breath coming in gasps from his open mouth against her neck, and she emitting groans and cries of passion that climbed the scale until at last they joined in one great, convulsive cry, and her body was rigid against his.

The expression on her face was one he would always delight in: the look of a woman who has been satisfied by her man. The curves of her cheeks were softer, and suffused with a ruddy glow. Her eyes were half-closed, and she regarded him with a smile half-shy, half-sly. Her breath came slowly. She made little designs upon his upper arm and shoulder with one fingernail.

They said nothing but only looked at each other and spoke with the turning of one corner of a mouth, the raising or lowering of an eyelash. They stretched out side by side in the sunlight, their hands catching and pulling sometimes at the soft grass, and to their ears came birdcalls and the voices of the trees.

It was so good to be rejoined—too good to speak about it. They lay content in their togetherness.

—Until a pang furrowed her brow.

Headache? he asked. He felt its echo.

She nodded and sat up, putting one hand to her head . . .

. . . and took off the amplifier helmet.

Elron blinked. They were sitting on the floor of the lab. Both were nude. His body ached from the hard floor, and he felt a sense of loss, a melancholy that he could not explain to himself.

"Was it real?" he asked in a slow voice as he picked up his clothing.

Shannara gently set the helmet down and massaged her temples. Then she looked at him. "What do you think? Does it matter?"

"In a way, yes. And in another way, not at all. How do you feel?"

She looked at him with cat's eyes. "Satisfied," she said purringly.

He broke into a grin. "Ah, no. I meant, from the amplifier."

"That too. If I use it too long, it seems to create headaches, but not to the extent it did before. And my control —it's infinitely better."

"Why is that?"

"It can't be the machine—it's unchanged. It must be me."

"I can't understand why they never developed it more."

"I'm not sure myself. But I suspect it was pressure from the more gifted. They saw it as creating rivals for them out of—well, just anybody at all. They occupied favored positions in society—how I envied them! I was so disappointed when they couldn't let me keep the helmet permanently."

In a basement garage they found an operating ground-effect machine. This was a strange car that looked at first like a squared-off platform. It measured ten feet across by twenty-five feet long. Passengers rode in the cab that sat over the platform, raised up on short stilts. The cab

looked like a small room, windows all around, chairs all facing forward. The operator sat at the front in a center chair that faced a console and windows beyond it.

The power cells were charged and had their own solar charging panels on the roof. The machine, like others in the garage, of which it was the smallest, seemed ready to be used at an instant's notice, its maintenance tended for all these years by the ubiquitous machines of the city.

Shannara had never operated such a vehicle before, having always been a passenger, but she enticed Elron up into the cab, to a seat beside hers. Then she began throwing switches.

From below a vibration began to be felt, and then a whine that rose from a subsonic throb to a high pitch. The machine trembled a little, then lifted. Shannara toed a pedal, and the nose began to edge around and forward, toward the ramp for the garage door. Elron sat white-faced in his seat and clung to it with both hands.

Shannara guided the clumsy-looking vehicle down the street and then out over the turf. It did not move quite so fast along the rougher ground, but it still glided as though over a supersmooth oiled surface.

As they crested the hill before the village, they saw several figures running down the incline in full arm-waving panic.

Chapter Seventeen

To the villagers, the monstrous machine that came down over the hill could only be the personal chariot of Lord Anatha, the Lord of Death himself. They scattered before it, certain that it was a visitation come upon them in retribution for allowing the two strangers to make their pilgrimage into the city.

But they were quite astonished when the whining demon-thing settled to a quiet halt in the center of the village, and a door opened in it from which the two strangers themselves climbed out.

"Tita?" Shannara called.

Tita poked her head out from a doorway.

"No, I am not coming!"

"It's quite safe."

Eli's head appeared behind Tita's. "She has decided to stay," he said. He smiled. "As my wife."

They turned the hovercraft out onto the river, since it would glide best over smoother surfaces. The wind from its fans shot spray out on all sides, and as they made their way downriver, they had the pleasure of seeing the old man on the rock take one frightened look at their approaching machine and bolt off the rock toward the village. "Do you suppose he thought we were coming after him?" Elron gasped between howls of laughter.

"Perhaps that will shake him of his obstinacy," Shannara agreed. "He's lived off the kindness of others long enough."

They followed the river out into the open water, and thence down the coast, retracing their earlier route.

The crossing was easier this time, and much faster. They had to spell one another at watch—this was a craft

which could not be simply allowed to drift untended—but it covered the distance at twice the speed of the small sailboat, and did it more smoothly as well, the fans flattening the smaller waves and riding easily over the larger ones.

Thus it was that in only a few days they were within sight of the coastal hills of the eastern continent, soon heading in through the gateway for the great bay of the inland sea. They followed within sight of the northern coastline, but none too close, for they had no desire to be sighted by the thieves of Ulloro or any other raiders who might choose to launch an attack upon them. For, as Shannara pointed out, the craft was by no means invulnerable, not having been designed to withstand attack. A bolt shot through its fans could sheer right through one or more blades, and the loose blades or fragments would rip through the floatation skirts that trapped the air cushion, like a hot knife through butter. Even a well-placed rock might get into the fans and wreck them.

They sailed past the green mountains, through the narrow waters between the mountain cliffs and the island that marked their continuation—a misty green upthrust in the quiet waters of the bay.

And gradually the bay narrowed, until they could see its southern side, and they were entering the mouth of the River Qar itself.

They slipped the craft up onto a grassy bank, scattering freshly fallen leaves in the fierce wind of the fans, and then settled to a stop.

This would be their last pause before returning to Qar to do final battle with the Others, the fearsome warlocks, Archer and Edwards. This would be their day of rest, a day when they could hunt fresh food and then enjoy it in a lazy meal, lying in the autumn sun together, hands and sometimes bodies entwined, refurbishing themselves in both body and spirit.

False summer was upon the land, and everywhere crisp leaves crackled underfoot, while those still on the trees were yellow, red, and orange-gold. Late-blooming flowers

poked their heads out in tiny clusters here and there, and Elron and Shannara it was an idyllic setting.

"It feels not unlike that—that place you brought us to," Elron remarked as he licked the grease from his hands. (Shannara had once again demonstrated her abilities as a cook, preparing a repast fit for a duke out of a single plump muney and the herbs and plants growing thereabouts.) "Can that helmet carry us back into that forest glade again?"

"Do you feel it should?"

"What do you mean?"

"I created that place as a love offering to you, as a place out of time and space where we might repair our ties and become whole again. But Elron, beauty in nature, as well as beauty in ourselves, is really there for the seeing at any time. We need not escape into fantasy worlds to find the fulfillment of our romance—it is always with us.

"Dearest Elron, how you suffered with me on that miserable journey to Ulloro! But you must realize that we will both have our moods, our bad times, our sufferings. We cannot simply turn from each other and deny each other. I . . . what I did was very wrong. I let myself become trapped by pain and remorse when I should have looked above it, to you. But you, too, Elron—you should not have let me fall into such a slough of despondency. We must communicate to each other, with each other. We must not allow ourselves to become separated from each other as we did then. What happens, happens. That we cannot change. We can alter only our reactions, the way it affects us. We must be open with one another, Elron."

They slept that night in each other's arms, warm and content. And when they rose with the dawn, it was with satisfaction and happiness tempered only by this, their final test, their last task in Qar.

"If we should fail this time, I will kill us both, rather than see us fall prey to the obscene whims of the evil ones," Elron said, but Shannara only counseled him to avoid such thoughts. They ate a good breakfast, then re-

entered their craft and sent it moving upstream once more.

The river was an old one, and it wandered back and forth in great twists, but at midmorning, they had come to the fork where the eastern branch joined the main river.

Sunlight played warmly down on open, empty grasslands. Here and there the tall ripe grass made gentle waves in the breezes.

There was no sign of City Qar. It was as though it had never been built.

"Can this be the right place?" Shannara asked.

"I've lived most of my life around here," Elron replied. "No mistake. Look—there's the tree to which the ferry rope was fixed." A gnarled old tree, its girth several feet, hung low over the western bank. But of the ferry and its rope there was no sign. The tree trunk was even free of the rolls of bark that had grown over and around the rope.

Puzzled, Shannara beached the hovercraft and shut it off. Picking up the amplifier helmet and powerpack, she led the way out and onto the ground.

"It doesn't feel right," she said.

"You're right. This *has* to be the place. And maybe they could level the city in a short time, but this much grass. . ."

"No. I mean up here." She tapped her forehead. "I keep sensing *wrongness.* Like, it's an illusion, what we see, and yet, because we see it this way it's real for us."

"Like the hall of mirrors!" Elron said.

"Yes—exactly. Help me with this thing, please."

While Elron attached the powerpack to her back, Shannara settled the helmet over her head. It was a polished silver globe that was cut away across her forehead like low bangs and followed her cheeks in a square to clip shut under her chin. Viewed from the rear, it was a perfect globe that seemed to enclose her head, only the black hair spilling out under it betraying the illusion. A thick cable coiled down from the underside of the back of the globe to the compact power cell pack strapped to her shoulders. It was not more than two inches thick, and not heavy.

She flexed her shoulders and declared it comfortable enough. Then she reached up with her hand and threw the switch that turned it on.

Immediately she frowned and rubbed her eyes. "Elron, do you see it?"

"See what? Nothing has changed."

She seemed to concentrate, her face tightening.

The rich sunlight seemed to waver, and the whole scene seemed to ripple around them as though viewed through a pool of clear water. Then everything grew misty, and he closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he was standing in a thin gray fog, and before them was the wall of the city.

They linked hands and followed the wall to the gateway. Here men lounged in attitudes of repose and indolence, but perfectly still. Elron noticed that there were no sounds but those of their own feet on the paving stones. The men gave no sign of recognition; indeed, they did not acknowledge the two in any way.

The streets had a deserted quality, and the fog hung low over their heads, mist needling their exposed skin with drops too tiny to see.

They walked through the marketing area and saw the stalls deserted, a few carts of rotten foodstuffs languishing at the curb, long abandoned.

"The important thing to remember is this," Shannara said. "As long as you see one of their illusions, it is real. I cannot tell what they will throw at us, but I'll try to dispell it if it is an illusion. But should it be . . . well, anything that attacks us, you may have to use your sword. Don't imagine that their illusions can't hurt us—they can, as long as we can see them."

"Of that I am well aware," Elron said. "But what do you make of these empty streets? Could this be another illusion?"

"No, it is real enough. Somehow, though, time moves more slowly for the people here—they exist in a dreamlike state while the real world passes them by."

Then they were standing in the square before the Ducal Mansion.

"What now?" Elron asked. "Do we go in once more?"

"I think not," Shannara said. She frowned at the forbidding stone edifice. "I sense them moving about in there, worms in their nest, thinking, planning. . . ."

Suddenly her hand was in his, gripping tightly.

Then the earth beneath their feet seemed to rock, to pitch them off balance, and they were falling.

They found themselves on a blue plain, the sky overhead black, but for a brilliant white star, too distant to be viewed as a disk but still bright enough for the land to be as light as day.

Standing some distance away were two enormous figures, giants towering into the sky. It took Elron some time to realize that the two great creatures, lumbering toward them in an ambling shuffle not unlike the movement of two mountains, were indeed Archer and Edwards.

Shannara still gripped his hand. Now the scene began to whirl around them, a dizzying vortex, as she attempted to regain control of it, and then, quite prosaically, they were again on the paving stones of the square, facing the two quite normal-sized warlocks, who had just emerged from the building's entrance.

Sweat stood out on Shannara's brow. "They seek to master us by illusion, and it requires all my effort just to hold us here in what must pass for reality. Elron! While they and I are thus preoccupied, you must slay them!"

"But—the illusions! Once I drop your hand. . . . ?"

"I will do my best, but you must not falter, whatever you meet."

She gave his hand a last squeeze, which he returned. Then he let go and . . .

. . . stepped into a boiling swamp. The mud was waist-deep, thick and constricting around him. Two suns burned down on him, the larger a deep orange. Its disk filled a quarter of the sky, and he felt as though it were falling upon him.

Obscenely red vines acted like live tendrils, catching and holding him as he blundered through the viscous

fetid-smelling mud. He had his sword out, and he used it to cut thruugh them in great slashing motions. Up ahead —up ahead he sensed two malignant entities, standing upon firm ground. Neither seemed aware of him; he felt antlike, beneath their notice.

He looked up. A silver globe hung in midair, black hair radiating out around it. A face was in the center of the globe: Shannara's face. Sweat flowed in rivulets down his face and neck and arms and back. The sword seemed heavier with every stroke he dealt to the resisting vines.

Shannara smiled at him.

And then he was once more in the square. He had covered but a quarter of the distance separating the antagonists.

Then his ears screamed in anguish, and he was floating in velvet darkness, tiny pinpricks of light all around him. His stomach flipped: he was *falling*. His breath involuntarily exhaled, and the moisture in it turned to tiny white crystals glittering before his throbbing eyes. He tried to take a breath again and could not.

He was in the square again. He had not advanced a step. His nose was bleeding copiously, his eyes stung, and his ears ached. He felt badly chilled, although only the cool fog reminded him of this. When he took two faltering steps, he felt very old and very tired, and he wanted nothing more than to lay his head down upon the stones and sleep.

"Come—come lie with me," said the voluptuous redhead. She smiled invitingly at him and touched his arm. "You're tired—you need loving care. Let me draw you a warm bath to relax your muscles."

A warm bath! He could lie in one for hours. He found the thought infinitely more appealing than this rather overblown and obvious houri. Her costume was thin to the point of transparency, but her charms were, he discovered, no more than those possessed by most women, in roughly the same places, of roughly the same shape. The mystery of womanhood was not now quite the mystery it had once been.

He smiled wearily. "I'm sorry," he said. He pushed her gently aside. Beyond, in the curtained shadows, loomed two figures. "I have other business for now."

She pouted and tried to cling to him. "Stay," she said. "Stay with me." Her voice seemed unconvinced and unconvincing; she was only mouthing words.

Instead he evaded her grasp, and ran forward . . .

. . . toward a row of snarling monsters. He was in a wide, flat street, buildings rising high and close on each side of him. People thronged the sidewalks and now were turning to stare at him—while bearing down on him, brightly colored metal monsters with shiny teeth and four bright eyes honked raucously at him.

He wanted to turn and run, but "You must not falter," Shannara had said, and beyond this screaming chaos lurked the shadows of the Others. He ran toward the things, sword in hand, and they split ranks to swerve around him, rolling past on bulging wheels, and he glimpsed inside them men and women, guiding, controlling them like Hagendorf's car.

Then he was in the square again. He had come two-thirds of the distance.

The two Others seemed locked, immobile, and for the first time he detected strain upon their faces—strain and great weariness. He remembered that their magic drained them. Shannara, however, could rely upon the power of her powerpack. The trial would be a mental strain, but her actual powers would be externally supported and amplified. He felt reassured. Perhaps, this time . . . He ran forward a few more steps, and . . .

. . . was deep in the swirling current of some vast body of water. He let go his sword and stroked mightily for the surface. His chain mail was heavy, and it held him back. His breath was threatening to burst forth in an exhalation that would see him drown in his next convulsive gasp. But he kicked with his feet and stroked upward with his arms, and then at last his head popped above

water, and he drew a shuddering breath and whipped his head to throw his hair from his eyes.

All was darkness—no stars, no moons. His sense of direction was lost. Which way had he been facing? Where were the Others?

He craned his neck and peered about. Then he saw her—a pale shimmering orb of dully reflective silver, a misty face centered in it. She seemed to nod, and he turned in the direction of her nod, his back to her, and began swimming.

His fingers struck dry stone, and then he was in the square again, on his belly on the rough stones. He looked up.

Feet stood directly before him. He looked higher. He was at the feet of the warlock called Archer. The man was a frozen statue and appeared not to see him. Slowly Elron put his hand to his belt and withdrew his knife. His sword was gone—this would have to do.

Quickly, catlike, he came to his feet before the tall man and brought his knife in a downward thrust, ripping into Archer's gut.

Blood spilled out, and then pink twisting organs. Still Archer stood silent. Then suddenly the long puffy snake of Archer's intestines whipped up, at Elron's throat, and he was struggling against its python grip. He ripped at it with his knife, and cut it free of the dead man, but still it clung, drawing its slimy, foul-smelling coils tighter and tighter around his neck. He clawed with his fingers but could get no purchase on it.

Archer, meanwhile, sank slowly, his knees bending outward, like a tree just beginning to fall.

Elron hurled himself over the collapsing Archer, at Edwards. Now the malevolent face of the fat man began to turn toward him, his lips parting maliciously. Elron felt himself paralyzed, his throat tightening against his rasping breath, unable to lift his knife.

Elron!

Shannara's intense command seemed to wipe a film away from his eyes, and at the same time restore his

breath. He involuntarily raised a hand to his neck. There was nothing there; there had never been anything there.

He faced Edwards. The insane warlock's eyes seemed to glitter magnetically, drawing him closer and closer, opening wider and wider, stretching open to swallow him.

. . .

He shook his head. *No!* Shannara had counterblocked all Edwards's illusions, and he no longer had the aid of Archer. This was only a defeated man standing before him now: a fat, scared little man.

"Why did you not go . . . back where you came from? Why did you come here?" he asked, holding the knife before him, its tip pointed at Edwards's throat.

For a single moment, Edwards looked fully human, tired and sad. "If only we could have," he wheezed. "But our lifelines to our own place and time were severed. There was no path—no finding of the way. We had no choice." A tear made its way down one fat cheek.

"You are despoilers of all that is good," Elron said. "You reek of evil." Yet he could not feel this now. The hatred that had sustained him had leaked away. And with it had gone the fear. He was no longer afraid of this dumpy little man. He almost pitied him. He seemed smaller now, as though deflated by the loss of his silent partner.

Elron pushed the knife forward until he could feel its tip at his own throat. One did what one must do. Edwards was a disease, a malignant growth that must be cut from this mortal existence. He pushed the knife a little deeper, the pain thin in his throat, a little blood already trickling warmly down his neck. Time to be done with it! *He must do this thing now.*

"No!"

Shannara yanked furiously against his arm, throwing the final slash of the knife into empty air. "No! Oh, Elron, *no!*"

He stared at her wide-eyed. What did she mean? Why was she trying to stop him now?

Edwards stared up at him with sad gray eyes. His throat was clean.

Elron felt his own, sudden realization churning his stomach sickeningly. His hand was sticky with blood—his own blood. *His knife had been at his own throat.*

He gave vent to a primeval howl—pure animal rage. He seized Edwards's head and tipped it back, then slashed the man's neck with a single stroke that half-decapitated him.

Blood pumped from Edwards's jugular, and his eyes still held an imploring, puppy-dog look, an accusing stare that cried out his innocence. Elron let him fall into the pool of his own blood.

With Shannara's arm around his waist, he stepped back, trembling.

Bright sunlight poured down over the square, washing the fog and gloom away from every corner. And as they watched, the bodies of the two dead Others seemed to shrivel in the light, to grow smaller and darker, until in moments they were only blackening skin stretched tightly over disintegrating bones: the remains of corpses long dead.

Elron felt very used, and very tired.

Chapter Eighteen

BRIGHT SUNLIGHT streamed in through the curtains of the third-floor window. The canopy drapes of the bed were turned back, and the sunlight crept slowly across the fluffy pillow until at last it was on Elron's sleeping face.

Elron tossed and turned on his side to escape the light and heat, but then opened his eyes.

Staring back at him was Shannara's impish smile. She kicked back the covers, revealing their nude bodies. She

stroked his chest, then let her hand wander down across his belly.

"Ah! Just as I like it," Shannara purred.

"What, *again*, you shameless wench?" Elron mock-groaned. "Is there no sating of your lusts?"

"None."

"But it is the dawning of a new day, and I must be up and about. There are important things to be tended to."

"You said that yesterday."

"So I did. And what good did it do me? We finally rose in the late afternoon, barely in time for token appearances."

"What can be so important that you must desert me?"

"Why, there's the business of this city to be seen to! A duke can never ignore things entirely, and with things as they are, we have much to straighten out!"

"I thought you appointed committees and such things."

"And so I did. But it is the function of committees that after deliberating and debating every issue, they must refer it to their duke—to me."

"But you made that old man—Hogun?—your advisory minister. Can he not take care of things? For at least these first few weeks?"

"Hussy! It has been three weeks now we've been married, and you show no sign of slackening. Besides, an advisory minister is happy only when he is advising. You must realize, my dear, that there is a very good reason why they chose me their new duke, and it has nothing to do with how we saved them from the warlocks. Each man craves only limited responsibility. Beyond that point, he is happy to pass it along and be told what he must do. And if each man so relinquishes his responsibility, it must ultimately devolve upon one single man—me. If I reverse the train and demand that they think for themselves, they will soon grow resentful, and I shall be overthrown, and we shall no longer have this fine mansion for our own."

"I wouldn't care. I'd still have you, and all for myself, then."

He burst into laughter. "And we should both toil long, hard days for the food that is placed before us now by servants, and the fresh bed linen, and the clothing we wear—both of which become so quickly soiled. . . .

"I should be happy to live with you in the wilderness, quite naked. And I am a better cook than any of your servants anyway." She thrust her lower lip out at him. Her grip had never relaxed upon him. "Besides, they would not dare. Am I not now the Sorceress of Qar, to whom they point with fear and wondering? Am I not the Sorceress who divines their hidden thoughts and deceits and tells you truly? Now, come to me, my wildebeest darling."

And Elron sighed and did as he was told.

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